



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Prayer

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore how the practice of prayer opens us to God's gracious activity in our lives and forms us in Christ-like ways of perceiving, caring for, and acting in the world. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Why are we so deeply challenged by the Apostle Paul's instruction to make every aspect of our lives a prayer? We tend to think of praying as occasionally talking to God. But clearly the Apostle has a different idea about the nature of prayer than the one we ordinarily have.
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Focus Article:

📖 Pray without Ceasing
(*Prayer*, pp. 11-17)

Suggested Article:

📖 Prayerful Intimacy
(*Prayer*, pp. 80-83)

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Pray without Ceasing

Why are we so deeply challenged by the Apostle Paul's instruction to make every aspect of our lives a prayer? We tend to think of praying as occasionally talking to God. But clearly the Apostle has a different idea about the nature of prayer than the one we ordinarily have.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:15-24

Meditation[†]

All our capacities — reason, speech, volition, affection, and action — must be molded by the activity of prayer. Moreover, as prayer becomes central in our lives, all that we do becomes part of prayer. As the Benedictine motto has it, *laborare est orare* — to work is to pray.

Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba

Reflection

"We get on our knees before bed or offer a blessing at table at the appropriate times of day, and we think of these as moments of prayer and are certainly not doing them all the time," notes Paul Griffiths. "But for the Christian tradition, for the most part, this is an impoverished understanding of prayer. It is not wrong, it is just inadequate." In the Apostle Paul's astonishing call for unceasing prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17), Griffiths discerns a deeper understanding of the nature of prayer.

Paul sees all the good things we enjoy — talents, opportunities, and virtues; family, friends, and institutions; food, clothing, and latest technologies; indeed our very lives — as undeserved gifts from God (1 Corinthians 4:7). To be grateful for them is to acknowledge our indebtedness to and welcome a relationship with God — two attitudes that are essential to adoration and prayer. This suggests, writes Griffiths, that to pray constantly "is to cultivate the habit of gratitude for gift in such a way that being grateful becomes, for us, an attitude that informs all we do."

Developing a habit of unceasing prayer would change how we perceive, care for, and act in the world. It would make us:

- ▶ *more attentive to the particulars of our own and others' giftedness.*

Contrast how you would treasure a keepsake from your beloved with how you might neglectfully use a pushy advertiser's unwanted 'gift.' In the former case, you notice the details of the gift and lovingly guard it. Through prayer, one begins to experience other people and the good things of this world that way, Griffiths says, as "given by the God who is *interior intimo tuo*, within what is most intimate to yourself, as well as being *superior summo tuo*, above what is highest in you."

- ▶ *more receptive to God.* When Augustine (354-430) wondered why God, who already knows everything we need or want, tells us to petition for things in prayer, he concluded: "God wants our desire to be exercised in our prayers, so that we become able to receive what he is prepared to give." Prayer trains our love. When we do not pray, "our hearts are trammled in the direction of ungrateful possessiveness," Griffiths notes. But through the



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practice of prayer, "our hearts are opened, increasingly and gradually, to the possibility of receiving the gift, which is, in the end, sanctification."

- ▶ *less anxious and afraid*. "Our desires, sculpted into gratitude's shape by ceaseless prayer, become attuned to the fact that the happy or blessed life, the *beata vita*, is in fact being constantly offered to us by the Lord," writes Griffiths. This allows us to see the world as it is—its "sufferings and injustices and agonies, though real, are not the last word."

Unceasing prayer, then, is a grateful attitude toward God that undergirds all our thoughts and activities. Verbal prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, or intercession, become instances of this attitude, Griffiths concludes. "Explicit address to the Lord, whether in private or in corporate worship, is a moment of filigreed ornament in a deeper and more quotidian process which is identical with the Christian life as a whole."

Study Questions

1. Why do we tend to think of prayer as only explicit talking to God? How is this view "not wrong," but "inadequate"?
2. The fourth-century desert Christians believed "unceasing prayer soon heals the mind." In light of Paul Griffiths' account of prayer, how would you describe this "healing"?
3. On Griffiths' view of unceasing prayer, what would it mean for our work to become prayer? List the daily jobs that you rarely experience as prayerful. Are there ways to make them part of your prayer, or should you stop doing them?
4. Consider how Charles Wesley characterizes the fundamental attitude of prayer in "Talk with Us, Lord." How might this attitude become unceasing?
5. In "Prayerful Intimacy," Les Hollon recounts a busy day during which he was acutely aware of "the tenacious desire of people to live intimately with God." How was the day filled with different forms of Christian prayer? Have you experienced such days suffused with prayer?

Departing Hymn: "Talk with Us, Lord" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Talk with us, Lord, yourself reveal,
while here o'er earth we rove;
speak to our hearts, and let us feel
the kindling of your love.

Here, then, our God, vouchsafe to stay,
and bid our hearts rejoice;
our bounding hearts shall own your sway,
and echo to your voice.

You call on us to seek your face,
'tis all we wish to seek;
to attend the whispers of your grace,
and hear you only speak.

Charles Wesley (1740), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. COLUMBA or MCKEE

† Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds., "Introduction," *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 2.



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Focus Article:

📖 Learning to Pray
(*Prayer*, pp. 18-25)

Suggested Articles

📖 Lord, Teach Us to Pray
(*Prayer*, pp. 84-88)

📖 Exploring the Forms of Prayer
(*Prayer*, pp. 89-93)

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Learning to Pray

The Christ who responds to the plea “Lord, teach us to pray” still helps Christians learn to pray through his body, the Church, in its historical experience of learning the practice of prayer. We have much to learn, then, from the fathers and mothers of the early Church as they learned this practice.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 11:1-13

Meditation¹

Before all things the Teacher of peace and Master of unity is unwilling for prayer to be made single and individually, teaching that he who prays is not to pray for himself alone. For we do not say, “My Father who art in heaven,” nor “Give me this day my bread” Prayer with us is public and common; and when we pray we do not pray for one but for the whole people because we the whole people are one.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (d. 258)

Reflection

Prayer, as communion with God through adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition for oneself, and intercession for others, has been the essential practice of the Christian life in every age. During the “patristic” era – the four centuries after the New Testament – the fathers and mothers of the Church learned much about how to pray. “When the monk replaced the martyr as the ideal embodiment of the Christian life following the end of persecution early in the fourth century, the work of prayer was seen as essential to the monastic vocation,” writes Steve Harmon. “That made prayer essential to the life of every Christian, who was called to deny self and follow Jesus, whether celibate or married, whether withdrawn to the cloister or working in the city. Prayer was so inseparable from all aspects of the life of the Church that a history of the patristic era could easily be written from the standpoint of the history of early Christian prayer.”

We can learn much today by studying these early Christians’ successes, as well as failures, in praying with the aid of the Psalter and written texts in public worship services.

- ▶ *The “collect” drew worshipers into the story of God. “The collectio was a prayer voiced by a leader of worship on behalf of the congregation that had the function of collecting together the prayers of the people,”* Harmon writes. These prayers of adoration and thanksgiving rehearsed the history of God’s actions to invite worshipers “to become participants in God’s story, so that in prayer God’s story and the worshipers’ stories became intertwined.” Collects typically included an address to God, a reference to a divine attribute or saving act, a petition, the purpose for the request, and a conclusion. Here the elements are identified by number: “(1) O God the Trinity, (2) Whose Name is ineffable, Who purifiest the cavern of man’s heart from vices, and makest it whiter than the snow; (3) bestow on us Thy compassions; renew in our inward parts, we pray Thee, Thy Holy Spirit, by Whom we may be able to show forth Thy praise;



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(4) that being strengthened by the righteous and princely Spirit, we may attain a place in the heavenly Jerusalem; (5) through Jesus Christ our Lord.”²

- ▶ *Praying the Lord’s Prayer drew worshipers into “the reign of God as already a present reality but not yet fully realized ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’”* Harmon emphasizes that “the ‘we’ and ‘our’ first-person plural language in both the collect form and the Lord’s Prayer... reminded the worshiper that as a new creation in Christ, she was fundamentally an ecclesial person for whom ‘we’ and ‘our’ took precedence over ‘I’ and ‘my.’”
- ▶ *Singing biblical psalms in Sunday worship and daily services of fixed-hour prayer “supplied words to pray when the mind of the worshiper could not.”* Harmon notes, “Praying the psalms offered a remedy for this paralysis by modeling prayer as utter honesty with God and by portraying God as the sort of God who readily hears honest prayer.” Thus, when they prayed Psalm 139, they learned “it is because God knows everything about us, because God is always with us, and because God is all-powerful in working in our lives that we can be completely honest with God in prayer.... Nothing we can say or think in the context of prayer can shock God – God has heard it all before, and God knows we are thinking it anyway.”

While ancient lectionaries did not censor out from public worship the imprecatory psalms with their passages of brutal candor (e.g., Psalm 137:8-9), most sermons and commentaries muffled their meaning with allegorical interpretations. “The early fathers and mothers of the Church learned imperfectly to pray from the Psalter,” Harmon concludes, “and so do we, to the extent that we shrink back from praying these psalms boldly in their plain sense and fail to emulate their example of honest prayer when we pray in our own words.”

Study Questions

1. What can we learn about praying, in public worship and in private devotion, from the “collect” form of early Christian prayer?
2. In the meditation above, how does Cyprian commend the use of plural pronouns in prayer? What danger do we face when we slip into using “I” and “my” instead?
3. How does Burt Burleson’s hymn “When Gathered Saints in Common Praise” express the worth of communal prayer?
4. In Psalm 139, according to Harmon, how are God’s attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence described in down-to-earth language? What is the value of this?
5. Would you censor any verses in Psalm 139 from public worship today? If so, why? If not, why not?

Departing Hymn: “When Gathered Saints in Common Praise”

1 Cyprian, *St. Cyprian on the Lord’s Prayer*, translated by T. Herbert Bindley (London: SPCK, 1914), 32-33.

2 William Bright, *Ancient Collects and Other Prayers*, seventh edition (Oxford, U.K.: James Parker, 1902), 37.



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Focus Article:

📖 Not about Me
(Prayer, pp. 26-35)

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Not about Me

Perhaps a burning preoccupation with oneself can coexist with our prayers of thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession, even as it contaminates and domesticates them. But the prayer of praise requires a deep decentering of the self.

Prayer

As we turn aside from all else...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we declare our faith...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we acknowledge our need...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we search for wisdom...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we listen for your call...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we lift up our hearts...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-18

Reflection

"I remember reading a list of the five elements of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition (for self), and intercession (for others). It triggered a shocking recognition: I do not know the first thing about prayer," writes Merold Westphal. He is comfortable thanking God for good gifts, seeking forgiveness, and asking for God's help for himself and others. The tough one is praise. Why this "dis-ease"? Praise requires "the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself."

Westphal explores three prayers to reveal the "kenotic gesture," the total emptying of the self, that is "the condition for the possibility not only of praise but of all five elements of prayer, insofar as they can be united in a complex whole in which each knows its proper place and plays its proper role."

- ▶ *Samuel's prayer*, "Here I am for you called me. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:5, 10), teaches us three things about prayer. First, prayer is the task of a lifetime, for it requires that we really listen to God. "We only kid ourselves," Westphal says, "if we think we have finished learning how to listen to God as God deserves to be listened to." Second, "prayer needs silence, not only external but also internal silence; for our minds and hearts can be and usually are very noisy places even when we emit no audible sound. God speaks in and as the silence." Finally, Christian prayer is rooted in Scripture. "The very call to which we may respond 'Here am I' can come as a mysterious voice in the night, but it typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth. Before prayer is a fivefold speech act on our part, it is listening to the word of God as found in Scripture."



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- ▶ *Mary's prayer at the annunciation, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), addresses God as the One who speaks and is present. The question is whether she is willing and able to be present with God. She knows "that to be present to God, she must turn away from the world in which she has been immersed. Not that there is something evil about the world, into which, in fact, God will send her back with a task. It is rather that apart from that turning, the world is defined by her agenda, however innocent, and not God's."*
- ▶ *This 'prayer' of Elvis, "I want you, I need you, I love you with all my heart," might be addressed by the believing soul to God. In its crassest, most self-preoccupied form, this "I love you" might simply mean "I want and I need your help, your blessings, the benefits of having you on my side." But suppose one really means, speaking to God, "I want you, you yourself, not your gifts" (cf. Psalm 42:1-2a; 63:1). Here is a glimmer of hope. "But if we ask how it might be possible to 'have' or to 'possess' God, to drink of the living water (John 4:7-14, 7:37-39), we will realize that the 'you belong to me' path leads away from our goal, and only the 'I belong to you – I am at your disposal' path leads to it. God cannot be 'had' in any other way," Westphal writes. "God is always at our disposal, always giving Godself to those who are willing to take. But the only way to take this gift is to place ourselves at God's disposal, to give not this or that but our very selves to God."*

Henri Nouwen described the paradox of prayer this way: "it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift."[†] Westphal concludes: "No doubt it is a privilege to be gifted; but there is a price. One must abandon the project of being the center in terms of which meaning, and truth, and goodness are defined. To dare to pray is to consider the price worth paying. To mature in prayer is to discover that the price itself is a gift."

Study Questions

1. How can "a burning preoccupation with oneself" contaminate and domesticate prayers of thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession? Do we easily overcome this problem when we pray with a communal "we" instead of "I"?
2. If we take the prayers of Samuel and Mary to be models of praise, then adoration is not saying flowery words about God. What, then, is the substance of their adoration?
3. In what sense, then, is Christian prayer both "the task of a lifetime" and a gift from God?
4. Discuss Merold Westphal's claim that "Scripture and prayer are integrally intertwined. Before prayer is a speech act on our part, it is listening to the word of God as found in Scripture." How does Scripture guide and inform your praying?
5. How, according to Westphal, does Mary's prayer echo in the life and prayers of her son, Jesus?

Departing Hymn: "When Gathered Saints in Common Praise" (vv. 1 and 4)

[†] Henri J. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 89.



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Focus Article:

📖 Praying for a Change
(Prayer, pp. 43-50)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Prayer in Eclipse
(Prayer, pp. 76-79)

📖 The Orant
(Prayer, pp. 68-69)

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Praying for a Change

Do petitionary and intercessory prayers bring about real change? We may not openly doubt their efficacy, but the adage “prayer doesn’t change things, it changes us” has become an easy escape to explain away mind-bending puzzles about prayer and reconcile traditional Christian practice with contemporary rationality.

Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, we join our hearts and lift them to you now in prayer for one another.

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

For those who have wandered away from you we pray...

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

For those who are in need of healing we pray...

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

For those who are confused and lonely we pray...

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 18:1-14

Meditation†

Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine.

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Reflection

Asking God for things may seem crass (and in our practice it sometimes is) or unbelievably mysterious, but Scripture teaches us to petition for ourselves and intercede for others. When Luke says Jesus’ story of the unjust judge (or, the persistent widow) is “a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1), it seems we are to be “continually coming” before God with requests. Paul’s exhortation to “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18) is “designed not just to make [disciples] feel better about the struggle in which they are engaged, but to help them win that struggle,” Todd Edmondson notes. “So, when the author of James encourages his readers to be steadfast in prayer because ‘The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective’ (James 5:16), the effects he is talking about are not merely inward stirrings of the soul, but rather what we might call the ‘real-world’ effects of prayer.”

Since our culture is skeptical of practices it does not comprehend, Edmondson faithfully seeks to understand something of how intercessory and petitionary prayers work. He invites us “to reconsider how we customarily think about prayer and to recover perspectives that have been lost over the years.”

How can prayer affect God? Prayer is not just a human action, but “a relationship involving God, the world God has created, and the Church,” he writes. We do not change God, but “Why should we imagine that God would be unmoved, not only by the prayers of his



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people, but also by the constant intercession of the Son at his right hand and the Spirit moving within his Church?" A request to God in prayer is like an audience seeking an encore: when a band has worked hard to draw an appreciative response, the audience's request becomes a cause of the band performing its long-planned, well-loved piece. "After we have encountered in Scripture and in the life of the Christian community the awesome work of God, we are moved to ask for more. And God, like a performer who rightly takes great joy in his magnificent work, is more than happy to grant our request," Edmonson explains.

Not every prayer is answered quickly and to our expectation. Many "crushing disappointments" remind us prayer is a mysterious, awesome relationship. Yet they "do not tell us that prayer is ineffective in the 'real world' anymore than Jesus' pleading in Gethsemane or his cry from the cross proves his relationship to the heavenly Father was somehow lacking."

How does the habit of prayer change us? We become more Christ-like, "bolder petitioners, more compassionate intercessors, more active participants in this three-fold relationship among God, the world, and the Church," Edmondson concludes. As we mature as in discipleship, "God's presence in this world is revealed in us, and prayer is not incidental to this process."

Study Questions

1. How can we avoid two extremes—a rationalistic view that God is not moved in any way by our prayers and a naïve view that we can manipulate God with them?
2. In "Prayer in Eclipse," Ken Massey says profound family tragedy and unfulfilled prayers resulted in his spiritual dryness. What dimensions of prayer led him from this "eclipse"?
3. In James Montgomery's hymn "Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright," how does the practice of prayer, especially through dark times and unfulfilled requests, transform us?
4. According to Heidi Hornik in "The Orant," what is the significance of the gesture of the orant, especially for the disciple who petitions God for oneself or intercedes for others?

Departing Hymn: "Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright" (vv. 1, 5, and 6)

Lord, teach us how to pray aright
with reverence and with fear;
though dust and ashes in your sight,
we may, we must draw near.

Patience to watch, and wait, and weep,
though mercy long delay;
courage our fainting souls to keep,
and trust you though you slay.

Give these, and then your will be done,
thus, strengthened with all might,
we, through your Spirit and your Son,
shall pray, and pray aright.

James Montgomery (1824), altered
Tune: ST. AGNES

† C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 2002, originally 1960), 8.



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Focus Article:

📖 Sweet Hours of Prayer
(Prayer, pp. 36-42)

Suggested Article:

📖 A Call to Prayer
(Prayer, pp. 66-67)

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Sweet Hours of Prayer

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Prayer: Psalm 55:1, 17, 22

Give ear to my prayer, O God;
do not hide yourself from my supplication.

Evening and morning and at noon

**I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.**

Cast your burden on the Lord,
and he will sustain you;

**he will never permit
the righteous to be moved. Amen.**

Meditation[†]

There is probably no image that expresses so well the intimacy with God in prayer as the image of God's breath. We are like asthmatic people who are cured of their anxiety. The Spirit has taken away our narrowness (the Latin word for anxiety is *angustia* = narrowness) and made freedom, a new life. This new life is the divine life of God himself. Prayer, therefore, is God's breathing in us, by which we become part of the intimacy of God's inner life. So, the paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize or manipulate God; but without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either.

Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-1996)

Reflection

Fixed-hour prayer (also called "the daily office" or "divine hours") is the ancient practice of pausing at regular times each day to pray. Prayer books typically include an invocation, a psalm and other scripture passages, a creed, a collect or other prayer of the Church, a hymn, and a benediction that are selected for the time of day and the season of the Church year.

Ruth Haley Barton writes that her affinity for this form of prayer came as a surprise. "I had been highly suspicious of what those in my evangelical tradition would have called 'rote prayers' – written prayers that we all feared would foster the vain repetitions that Jesus warned about. I was convinced that spontaneous prayers were the only real prayers because they came from the heart," she admits. "But I have discovered that there is another option and that is to allow the words of the great prayers of the Church to engage my heart and to really mean them!"

Barton commends the practice of fixed-hour prayer because:

- ▶ *It provides rich language to approach God.* "The farther along one gets in the spiritual life," she notes, "the harder it is to articulate the longings that roil beneath the surface of our lives, the intimacies of our life with God, the questions and disillusionments that leave us speechless. When our own words fail us, the well-chosen



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words of Scripture or the prayers from the old prayer books help us to express the inexpressible in deeply satisfying ways and open us to encounter with God.”

- ▶ *It is rooted in Jewish tradition and modeled in the early Church.* The psalmist alludes to fixed-hour prayer (Psalm 55:17; cf. 119:164) and Daniel prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). The book of Acts mentions that Peter and John prayed at certain hours each day (Acts 3:1; cf. 10:9), and surely Jesus and all his disciples followed this Jewish rhythm of prayer.
- ▶ *It connects us with a wider community of disciples.* “When we engage in fixed-hour prayer we are praying prayers that the Church has written down and prayed for centuries,” Barton observes. “This way of praying affirms that we are not alone, that we are part of a much larger reality – the communion of saints that came before us, those who are alive on the planet now, and all who will come after us. In a spiritual sense, praying with the Church through fixed-hour prayer expresses that deeper unity that transcends all our divisions – and that is no small thing.”

Study Questions

1. Compare fixed-hour prayer to other daily devotional practices of Scripture-reading and prayer. What makes it different?
2. What merit does Ruth Haley Barton see in a practice of fixed-hour prayer? Why is there a growing interest in it today?
3. Discuss Scott McKnight’s observation: “Living within the sweet caresses of the hours of prayer is the simplest and easiest way to consecrate our entire day as service to God.”
4. Consider the obstacles you might face in praying this way each day. How would you overcome them?
5. Jean-François Millet’s famous painting *The Angelus* depicts a fixed-hour prayer. What is striking to you about this image?

Departing Hymn: “Sweet Hour of Prayer” (vv. 1 and 2)

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!
that calls me from a world of care,
and bids me at my Father’s throne
make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief,
my soul has often found relief
and oft escaped the tempter’s snare
by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!
the joys I feel, the bliss I share,
of those whose anxious spirits burn
with strong desires for thy return!
With such I hasten to the place
where God my savior shows his face,
and gladly take my station there,
and wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer!

William Walford (1845)

Tune: GOLDEN CHAIN

† Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 126



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Our Deepest Prayer
(Prayer, pp. 59-63)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Our Deepest Prayer

We often fill our worship time – personal and corporate – to the brim with talking, singing, reading, and reflecting. There is too little prayerful waiting in silence, when we can hear our voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God’s waiting.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:26-27

Meditation¹

Prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart – it is the orientation of our whole body, mind, and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration. All good, meditative prayer is a *conversion of our entire self to God*.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

Reflection

Terry York describes “Waiting Here in Silence, God” as “a simple, sung prayer.” Through the text’s spare lines (see the departing hymn below), he reflects on the nature of meditative prayer and its central role in worship.

- ▶ “*Waiting here, in silence....*” Meditative prayer is rooted not in “anxious, red-light-at-the-intersection waiting,” he notes, but in “focus and surrender and an emptying. This waiting sits astraddle the line between the physical world and the spiritual world, leaning against the thin veil, listening in stereo. Waiting of this magnitude requires silence rather than music as a background, focus rather than distraction.”
- ▶ “*...we hear and own our deepest prayer.*” In this yielding silence our deepest prayer is not so much created by us, but *heard*. York says the experience is akin to hearing a duet of voices – “our voice, yes, but our voice in harmony with the voice of the Holy Spirit. God is down there in the middle of all we have hidden from him.” Echoing Paul’s description of prayer in Romans 8:26-27, York concludes, “Our deepest prayer is our voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God’s waiting.”
- ▶ “*Until this silence we’d forgotten....*” We tend to avoid silence and waiting, filling our lives instead with busyness and distractions. By this strategy, York suggests, we hope to avoid our destructive emotions and to forget our sins and failures. “Such avoidance techniques are futile attempts to be God rather than to turn the matters of our deepest prayer over to God,” he writes. “Ironically, even shallow prayer can be a way of avoiding our deepest prayer.”
- ▶ “*Resurrect to life and light....*” In meditative prayer, God brings to light our buried anger, illicit desire, spiritual apathy, envy, and pride, and through our repentance heals these wounds. Also, “There are happier resurrections [of suppressed hopes and dreams], the results of which are equally as freeing,” York believes. “Releasing to the light our hopes and dreams carries the



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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same risk as releasing our sins and failures, the very same risk. It is the risk of exposure, of being found out, to our embarrassment. 'You *dreamed* what?' and 'You *did* what?' are quite similar. Both expose the death of something within us. But resurrection awaits our deepest prayer."

- ▶ "Amen." This traditional close for prayer, meaning *so be it* or *let it happen*, "does not end the thought, the wrestling, or the encounter," notes York. Amen "begins with accepting God's love and forgiveness—believing it to be true, as humbling as that is" and continues with "giving oneself to waiting, not being in charge, not being in a hurry." This Amen is our commitment to embrace silence, allowing it to "become a familiar place and state of being."

"The words of our deepest prayer will no longer lie trapped, unattended and haunting," York concludes. "There will be no more night for what has been confessed. There will be no more night for what has been dreamed. Both have been liberated by the singer's courageous entrance into waiting and silence."

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for a person to become silent before God in prayer, according to Terry York? How is this different from other forms of relaxation and meditation?
2. When we are silent before God, what sort of "hidden" or "buried" things come to our attention? Why is this experience something we avoid?
3. We usually think of the Amen as the *end* of our prayer. In what ways, according to York, is the Amen a *beginning*?
4. Discuss Thomas Merton's observation that "All good, meditative prayer is a *conversion of our entire self to God*." How does this relate to York's description of our "deepest prayer"?
5. Recall your experiences of silence before God in meditative prayer. Have they been similar to those that York describes?
6. Review the ways in which silence is offered to God during worship in your congregation. Are the periods of silence frequent? Are they long? Discuss what they mean to you.

Departing Hymn: "Waiting Here, in Silence, God"²

Waiting here, in silence, God,
we hear and own our deepest prayer.
Until this silence we'd forgotten
that these words were hidden there.
Resurrect to Life and Light
what we have buried in our night.
Amen.

Terry W. York, *ascap* (2005)

Tune: WAITING HERE

¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958), 40.

² Text © 2005 by Terry W. York, *ascap*. Used by Permission.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Pray without Ceasing

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the Apostle Paul's instruction to pray without ceasing as calling us to cultivate a grateful attitude toward God that informs all that we think and do.
2. To discuss how this grateful attitude of prayer would make a difference in how we perceive, care for, and act in the world.
3. To consider the role of explicit verbal prayers in light of this more fundamental understanding of prayer.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Talk with Us, Lord, Yourself Reveal" locate one of the familiar tunes ST. COLUMBA or MCKEE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

In the section devoted to "unceasing prayer" in the *Apothegmata Patrum*, the early collection of sayings by and stories about the fourth-century desert Christians, you will find this pithy gem: "A hermit used to say, 'Ceaseless prayer soon heals the mind.'" (Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christians*, 12.12)

Consider that amazing promise: it "soon heals the mind." If ceaseless prayer is "an attitude of gratitude," as Paul Griffiths says, how does it transform our capacities to experience, think about, and care for the world rightly?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for "every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17) in our lives.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Thessalonians 5:15-24 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion of unceasing prayer focuses on the centrality of prayer in the life of discipleship. It raises central themes that we will explore in more detail in the other study guides for the Prayer issue. What is the essential nature of Christian prayer, and how is it tied to the story of God's gracious work through his people of Israel and the Church? How does the habit of praying to the Lord transform the one who prays? Why are explicit

verbal prayers, in private and in communal worship, so important? Why would it be wrong to “reduce” prayer to those occasions of explicit talking to the Lord?

When Paul Griffiths describes unceasing prayer as a pervasive attitude of grateful adoration to God for every good gift, he does not mean we should constantly wear a religious “smiley face” as though everything is good and from God. “Are we to be grateful for suffering, death, sin, agony, and hatred? No. Those are not gifts. They are anti-gifts, loss and lack rather than abundance overflowing. Those we lament,” he writes. “Lament, then, is the prayerful response to the gift’s damage as gratitude is to its wholeness. Both are required in a damaged world, and both belong to prayer.” The next study guide, “Learning to Pray,” will emphasize the importance of honest prayers of lament. For members of the study group who are enduring undeserved suffering or righteous anger, lament may be a significant part of their unceasing prayer.

Study Questions

1. Paul Griffiths notes that we separate life into compartments, thinking of our religious duties as distinct from our personal time and work responsibilities. Thus, adoration of God and prayer become activities we perform at certain times and places, but not all the time and everywhere. Furthermore, Scripture teaches us to talk to God, privately and corporately, with words of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession. If we reduce prayer to explicit talking to God, however, we tend to isolate God from our daily activities and make religion only an intellectual exercise.
2. Griffiths describes three ways that unceasing prayer changes us. We become more lovingly attentive to the details of the world, ourselves, and others’ lives; more willing to receive God’s good gifts; and more confident to invest our lives and care for the world as God cares for it. Members might discuss how each of these changes makes us less “conformed to this world,” but rather “transformed by the *renewing of your minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Romans 12:2). In other words, how does each change help us to perceive and love ourselves, others, and the world more accurately and fully?
3. Griffiths does not mean that we speak a blessing before each activity. Our work becomes a prayer when we work more attentively, with welcoming appreciation for divine giftedness, and confident investment in God’s gracious activity in the world. Daily jobs that are filled with distraction, that lure us to prideful isolation from God and isolation from others, or that appear to have little purpose, will not be experienced as prayerful. Even necessary and difficult chores, however, can be done attentively and filled with purpose.
4. Charles Wesley characterizes prayer as *carefully listening* while God talks to us, as *actively tuning out other noises in our lives* in order “to attend the whispers of [God’s] grace.” God does not speak through explicit words, but in movements of awareness in our hearts as we are stirred by God’s love (verse 1) and filled with joy at God’s presence (verse 2). As the Lord is revealed to us in this way, we are changed so that our love, our ‘speech,’ becomes an “echo to [God’s] voice” in the world. Encourage members to reflect on how the most mundane activities offer opportunities to listen closely for God’s redeeming presence in the world, through other people, and in our own thoughts and transformed desires.
5. In a paragraph that begins “During a recent Wednesday’s press” (*Prayer*, p. 82), Les Hollon recounts sixteen events during the day that were suffused with prayer. Several included explicit talking to the Lord (e.g., a men’s prayer breakfast, a weekly gathering of women to pray, a funeral and graveside service, a time of prayer with his wife, and texting a prayer to a man whose wife had just suffered a miscarriage). Other activities were prayerfully done in grateful awareness of God’s presence and gifts (e.g., a congregational Bible study, a visit with a family seeking a church home, and an evening writing session). Encourage members to list their typical daily activities that include explicit prayers or are prayerfully done. Do they remember special days or events that were suffused with prayer?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Learning to Pray

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 4, and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the role of written “collect” prayers in early Christian worship.
2. To consider the value of reading or singing psalms in the Psalter as our prayers.
3. To discuss the importance of communal prayers in reminding us of our identity as members of the Body of Christ.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide.

Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“A student visiting the Abbey of Gethsemane once asked Thomas Merton (1915-1968) why he had chosen to waste his life by living in a Trappist monastic community,” writes John Essick. “Merton responded politely and profoundly: ‘I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation.’ His gentle response to the student’s question highlights the relevance of prayer in an otherwise busy and bustling world. The utter commitment to the life of prayer apparent in Christians such as Merton suggests not only that prayer matters, but also that it is a practice that must be inculcated through long repetition if it is to become something resembling a vocation” (*Prayer*, p. 84).

If anyone has been an experienced “expert” on early Christian practices of prayer, it was Thomas Merton. His *Contemplative Prayer*, reviewed by Bruce Benson (*Prayer*, pp. 92-93), is a classic. He regularly taught courses on prayer and early Christian monasticism for the novitiates, the “beginner” monks, at Gethsemane. Do you suppose they were surprised to hear him say: “We do not want to be beginners [in regard to prayer]. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners, all our life!” (*Contemplative Prayer* [New York: Image Books, 1996 (original, 1971)], p. 37).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to teach us and enrich our discipleship through the long witness over the centuries of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 11:1-13 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion relies on Steve Harmon's insight that if the Church truly is Christ's body, then the Christ who responds to the disciples' request "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1) still helps us learn to pray through the historical experience of the Church. Harmon focuses on the development in the "patristic" period of using written prayers – the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, and the "collect" prayers – in public worship and daily fixed-hour prayer times. How were early Christians formed as disciples through these emerging practices of common prayer? They were drawn into the wider story of God's actions in history, reminded of their primary identity as "members one of another" in Christ's body (Romans 12:5; cf. Ephesians 4:25), and given words to approach God honestly when their own words and thoughts failed them.

Study Questions

1. Collect prayers connect us to both God's story and one another. They incorporate our praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession into the wider context of God's actions through the history of Israel and the Church. They allow us to weigh our immediate concerns and desires in light of God's kingdom over time and in many cultures. These prayers also connect us to one another in a worshiping congregation, precisely because they "collect" our individual prayers and offer them to God in one voice on behalf of the body of Christ. Encourage members to discuss the value of each part of the collect prayer in the study guide. How could they use this outline to enrich their own prayers offered to God in public worship and in private devotion?
2. As disciples, we are now "members one of another" in the body of Christ. How we perceive, care for, and act in the world is being reshaped by this new identity. This does not mean that we know everything about the physical needs, spiritual failings, and secret hopes of everyone in the congregation, but it does suggest that when it becomes appropriate for us to know these things, we would lift them before God as our own.
3. The first verse of "When Gathered Saints in Common Praise" notes how, through prayers of praise and petition, the individual becomes open to wider and shared concerns – "the closed and burdened soul is freed / by prayer transcending lesser need." The second verse mentions the healing power of intercessory prayers – "a kindness sent in Jesus' name / is prayer that's shared to heal the pain." The worshiping community is described in verse three as a place of "abiding grace" when we confess our "broken ways." Encourage members to share how their praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession to God were transformed on occasions when they prayed with "gathered saints in common praise."
4. Harmon quips that these big words to describe God – omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence – are "the shared *foreign language* of theologians, divinity students, and ministers." Divide members into three groups to collect the psalmist's concrete images for God's omniscience, or knowledge of everything (139:1-6), omnipresence, or presence everywhere (139:7-12), and omnipotence, ability to do all things (139:13-18). Reflecting on these and similar images are a form of adoration of God, and they may suggest words we can use to praise God's greatness through prayer.
"These truths about God's nature have the potential to motivate Christians toward utter honesty with God in two ways," Harmon notes. "First, knowing that God knows us completely should keep us from playing charades with God. God knows what is going on in our lives, so it is pointless to be anything but completely honest with God. Second, knowing that God knows us completely should give us the courage to speak our mind with God."
5. The unvarnished anger in verses Psalm 139:19-22 usually are censored. The Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* does not use the psalm; the *Book of Common Prayer* uses 139:1-17 once during Epiphany; the *Revised Common Lectionary* uses selections (139:1-6, 13-18; and 139:1-12, 23-24) in Epiphany and Ordinary Time. Harmon makes a case for using the entire psalm to commend honesty before God and explain its transforming power. However, would some members and visitors misunderstand the psalm as commending the anger itself?

Departing Hymn

"When Gathered Saints in Common Praise" can be found on pp. 51-53 of *Prayer*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Not about Me

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how all prayer, especially the prayer of praise, requires a deep decentering of the self, shifting the focus from ourselves and our projects.
2. To discuss how Christian prayer, in all its forms, must take root in Scripture.
3. To consider how prayer can be both “the task of a lifetime” and a gift.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

The story is told of some fourth-century monks who asked Abba Agatho what he discovered to be the most difficult part of the Christian life. “I may be wrong but I think nothing needs so much effort as prayer to God,” he replied. “If anyone wants to pray, the demons try to interrupt the prayer, for they know that prayer is the only thing that hinders them. All the other efforts in a religious life, whether they are made vehemently or gently, have room for a measure of rest. But we need to pray till our dying breath. That is the great struggle.” (*The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christians*, 12.2, translated by Benedicta Ward)

Merold Westphal agrees that even learning to pray is “the task of a lifetime” because it requires that we abandon our preoccupation with ourselves and our agendas. He calls this shift in focus the “deep decentering of the self.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Samuel 3:1-18 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This discussion focuses on the essential change of character that is produced in us and required of us by the practice of Christian prayer. Merold Westphal calls this change “a deep decentering of the self,” as prayerful adoration of God replaces one’s preoccupation with oneself, one’s interests, and one’s agendas. He describes the prayerful attitude as a “*kenotic* gesture,” adapting a Greek phrase from the hymn of praise to Christ who “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7).

As he reviews the prayers of Samuel and Mary as scriptural models of prayer, Westphal highlights their stance of silent waiting before the Lord. We will explore this theme in more detail in the sixth study guide, “Our Deepest Prayer.” Here it is important to emphasize that he is not describing a therapeutic practice of yogic meditation, but our preparation for and welcoming of a life-changing relationship with the God who is present and speaks to us through the words of Scripture.

Study Questions

1. Westphal begins with this story: “Our neighbors were visiting a cathedral in Italy with their three-year-old son. He saw a woman kneeling in one of the pews and asked what she was doing, ‘She’s praying,’ he was told. ‘She’s asking God for things.’ A few minutes later his parents found him kneeling in one of the pews. In response to their query, he replied that he was asking God for – gelato!” This three-year-old beginner’s prayer reminds us that too often we have not matured beyond our own gelato prayers: we just thank God for *my* gifts, seek divine forgiveness for *my* sins (or, more even more selfishly, just to remove *my* guilty feelings), and ask God to help *me* or *my* loved ones. The focus is on *me*, and I treat God like a divine therapist who responds to my beck and call.

Reflecting on the vulgarity of selfishly praying “Our father in heaven, hallowed be *my* name, *my* kingdom come, *my* will be done,” and so on, Westphal notes: “The crassness of this formulation is barely mitigated if we substitute *our* name, kingdom, and will for *mine*.” Communities of faith can offer self-centered communal prayers. As we consider how the self must become decentered in prayer, we should also recognize that congregations must become decentered in their communal praying.

2. The prayers of Samuel and Mary are remarkably short, simple, and unadorned. Surely they were spoken quietly, without dramatic flair. Their adoration is in being fully present to God, silently listening, and offering their full obedience. No part of their stance of adoration is easy for us, Westphal notes. Sometimes it is easier to say wonderful things about God – for *me* to say them before others do, and more fervently, with larger gestures, using more complex theological concepts, and so on – which would also call more attention to *me*. It is the very simplicity of Samuel and Mary’s adoration that is difficult for us.
3. The lifetime task is to “abandon the project of being the center in terms of which meaning, and truth, and goodness are defined. To dare to pray is to consider the price worth paying,” Westphal writes. Yet, in this task we are constantly being strengthened by God’s gracious Spirit. So, “to mature in prayer is to discover that the price itself is a gift.”

Encourage members to share their stories of learning to pray and growing in prayer. Has it been a great effort for them to pray, to be fully present and obedient to God? When have they experienced prayer as a gift, despite the effort of attention and submission it required?

4. “Scripture and prayer are so integrally intertwined,” Westphal writes, that “prayer can never be separated from some form of *lectio divina*,” the practice of attentively and obediently meditating on a scripture passage. “The very call to which we may respond ‘Here am I’ can come as a mysterious voice in the night, but it typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth.”

Scripture may inform our prayers directly, as we memorize prayers from the Bible, use biblical phrases in our own prayers, reflect on a passage of Scripture in *lectio divina*, meditate on the meaning of a biblical story or teaching, and so on. Or its influence may be more indirect, as our prayers are shaped by phrases we remember from scripturally based hymns, responsive readings, devotional books, and so on, or as we pray from a prayer book or written liturgy.

5. Mary’s prayer is reflected in Jesus’ model prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; cf. Luke 11:2b-4), and in his prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36/ Matthew 23:39; cf. Luke 22:42). The model prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer, requires attention and obedience to God when we pray to the Father that *your* name be praised, *your* kingdom come, and *your* will be done. “After, but only after I have made this move, I am in a position to pray rightly for material and spiritual blessings, daily bread, and forgiveness, for myself and for ‘us,’” notes Westphal. In the garden, Jesus adopts “the posture...of belonging and disposability” before the Father.

Departing Hymn

“When Gathered Saints in Common Praise” can be found on pp. 51-53 of *Prayer*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Praying for a Change

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 18:1-14	Luke 22:31-24
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss how prayer can affect God	Discuss the problem of 'unanswered' prayer
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 4	Questions 2 and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how petitionary and intercessory prayer can affect God.
2. To consider how the practice of petitionary and intercessory prayer can change us.
3. To explore the problem of 'unanswered' prayer within a Trinitarian understanding of God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright" locate the familiar tune ST. AGNES in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

When A. J. Jacobs experimented with living by biblical principles, he prayed three times a day and recorded the changes he noticed in *The Year of Living Biblically* (Simon & Schuster, 2007). Reflecting on Abraham's prayer on behalf of Sodom, he writes on Day 103 about intercession:

I'm not finished with my year, so I'm withholding judgment, but my rational side says that intercessory prayer today is no more effective than Abraham's effort. I still can't wrap my brain around the notion that God would change His mind because we ask Him to.

And yet, I still love these prayers. To me they're moral weight training. Every night I pray for others for ten minutes – a friend about to undergo a cornea surgery, my great-aunt whose sweet husband died in their swimming pool, the guy I met in a Bible study class whose head was dented in a subway accident. It's ten minutes where it's impossible to be self-centered.

"A pragmatic, psychological, even therapeutic approach to the practice of intercession is what readers might expect of a writer approaching the Judeo-Christian tradition from within the mainstream of Western culture," Todd Edmonson notes. "What may be more alarming is the inescapable reality that in just three months, a self-professed, lifelong agnostic like Jacobs has arrived at a perspective on prayer that is not markedly different from that held by many longtime Christians. We have an enormous amount of trouble coming to terms with how petitionary and intercessory prayers might bring about real change."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 18:1-14 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Asking God for things, whether petitioning for oneself or interceding for others, raises two puzzles. First, how can such prayers possibly ‘work,’ for given God’s complete knowledge and goodness, our requests should not affect God or make any difference in God’s actions. Second, why do they sometimes not ‘work,’ even when our requests are proper? The disappointments of unanswered prayer haunt us. Todd Edmondson refocuses these problems in two ways. He says prayer is not merely a human action, but is a relationship among God, the world, and the Church. He commends an analogy with an appreciative audience requesting an encore at the end of a concert. Further, he emphasizes that the Triune God prays through us and for us.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one session reflect on Edmondson’s account of how petitionary and intercessory prayer is effective. In the other, use Ken Massey’s “Prayer in Eclipse” to explore the problem of unanswered prayer.

Study Questions

1. These two extremes – a rationalistic view that God is not moved in any way by our prayers and a naïve view that we can manipulate God with them – are always in the background of Todd Edmondson’s discussion. The first view reinforces the widespread cynicism in our culture about petitionary and intercessory prayer; the second is prominent among those who teach a “health and wealth” gospel. These two views seem to feed off one another – in reaction to one extreme, some people retreat to the opposite view. Edmondson seeks a different way to understand what it means to ask God for things.

From a Christian perspective, these extreme views of prayer are based on misconceptions about the nature of God and God’s relation to the world. God is not the distant, unmoved creator assumed by the rationalistic view, but the Triune mystery to whom we pray, even as God prays through us and for us. And God is not the changeable creature assumed by the naïve view, but the creator who is active in redeeming the creation. The analogy with the musical artists (who work to draw their audience into asking for an encore, so that they might do what they have planned and the fans now want) illuminates, though it cannot entirely explain, the more complex relations among God, the world, and the Church.

2. In Ken Massey’s reflection, we can see the major elements of Edmondson’s rich theological discussion. Massey understands prayer not as merely something humans do, but as a mysterious relationship among God, the world, and the Adversary. (Edmondson mentions the Church, the body of Christ, as essential to true prayer. Ask members how they might extend Massey’s story to bring out this dimension.) Furthermore, Massey emphasizes that God in Christ prays *for us*, even when we cannot participate in the prayer due to emotional pain.
3. James Montgomery (1771-1854), the noted Moravian Church poet, was a newspaper editor and abolitionist. He was prominent in nineteenth century missionary movements. In verses one and five of “Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright,” he mentions that through the practice of prayer we develop virtues of proper “reverence and fear” for God, “patience to watch, and wait, and weep,” and “courage” to “trust” God. In verse six, he says God’s gifts strengthen us not to pray alone, but “through your Spirit and your Son.”
4. In a famous mosaic in San Apollinare in Classe, Italy, the congregation’s protecting saint, Apollinaris, is depicted as an orant (from Latin for “person who prays”) with his arms uplifted in the traditional cruciform gesture, and as a shepherd caring for twelve sheep. This iconography suggests that as an intercessor for the congregation, Apollinaris is like Christ, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. An orant in the early Church might petition God for her own needs as well, in which case the cruciform stance would reflect Christ’s submission to the Father’s will as he petitions for “this cup” of death to be removed.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Sweet Hours of Prayer

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the merits of the ancient Jewish and Christian practice of fixed-hour prayer.
2. To discuss the obstacles we might face in pursuing this form of prayer.
3. To identify print and online resources for members who want to begin this practice.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer” locate the familiar tune GOLDEN CHAIN in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“The first time I participated in fixed-hour prayer, I felt like I had come home to a place that I had never been and yet a place in which I truly belonged,” Ruth Haley Barton reports. “It was a simple evening prayer service signaling the beginning of a spiritual retreat with a few likeminded souls...”

“Some of the prayers were read in unison, some were read responsively – and I just lost myself in the beauty and simplicity of it all. Instead of having to think really, really hard about what to pray, I gave myself to the beauty of words that expressed deep longings and powerful praises that were true in me but I could never have found the words to say. Instead of getting caught up in the ego’s attempts to say something profound to God (and to the people around me!), I actually rested from all of that and *prayed*. Instead of listening to someone else’s interpretation or application of Scripture, I heard Scripture read without comment and listened for what God was saying to me in the context of our relationship. Instead of having to endure culturally relevant programming, this small group of us settled into a silence that was so rich and satisfying that I lost all track of time until someone finally nudged me to remind me that it was my turn to read Scripture! That was ten years ago and I have been praying that way ever since” (*Prayer*, 36-37).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study introduces the ancient Jewish and Christian practice of fixed-hour prayer. The practice varies in the number, length, and plans for the daily prayer sessions (“divine hours” or “offices”). Share several examples of

fixed-hour prayer books. Valuable resources like *The Book of Common Prayer* (<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/>) and *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book* (<http://www.ambs.edu/prayerbook>) can be downloaded for free. Ruth Haley Barton commends three valuable, easy-to-use prayer books: Phyllis Tickle's *The Divine Hours*, Edward S. Gleason's *Hour by Hour*, and *Little Book of Hours* from The Community of Jesus.

Study Questions

1. Forms of fixed-hour prayer have been practiced widely within intentional religious communities and in traditional Roman Catholic parishes, Anglican congregations, and Orthodox churches. The practice has been less common among other mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Pentecostal Christians. The latter have promoted similar daily practices of devotional reading and prayer – e.g., using devotionals from a denominational booklet, reading meditatively through the Psalms, following a lectionary of daily or weekly scripture readings, reading through all or part of the Bible each year, using a daily prayer list, meeting with congregants for daily or weekly prayer, and so on. Encourage members who have followed some of these practices to compare them to fixed-hour prayer.
2. The merit Ruth Haley Barton sees in fixed-hour prayer – nourishing community and friendship with other Christians, both now and through history; offering a direct and meaningful encounter with Scripture; fostering a habit of spiritual attentiveness through the day, which enriches the meaning of all one's work; developing a deeper relationship with the Triune God through prayer and recounting God's actions in history; offering opportunities for confession of sin and forgiveness – are also reasons for the growing interest in the practice today. Many Christians are hungry for a historically "thicker," more public form of discipleship that is not restricted to a "religious section" of their lives.
3. Just as following the Church year brings spiritual order to the weeks and months of our time, the daily offices give spiritual order to the hours of each day. Other events of our day – the meals we prepare, the words of encouragement we speak, the scheduled duties we perform, and the chance meetings we embrace – become rich in meaning as they are framed by and, in turn, help inform the sessions of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession.
4. Some obstacles involve *scheduling*: not enough time, inflexible work schedules, frequently changing schedules, traveling on the road, being constantly "on call" to serve others, etc. Others involve *lack of privacy*: no personal place at work, no quiet place at home, etc. *Lack of motivation* can be a problem: disappointment over lack of spiritual "results," guilt over forgetting some sessions and "falling behind," fear that others will think one is "too religious," lack of interest and support from one's family or coworkers, etc. *Spiritual distractions* must be faced: emotional or physical tiredness from serving others, spiritual apathy, shame from un-confessed sin, habits of distracting busyness or entertainments, etc. *Lack of resources* of useable, well-designed prayer books. Encourage members to list their top three or four obstacles, and brainstorm how to approach them. Perhaps they need to start with a more modest and realistic schedule of sessions, recruit friends to pray with them, find an electronic prayer book that travels on their computer, etc.
5. In this morning, noon, and evening devotion, practiced in traditional Roman Catholic parishes and some Anglican and Lutheran congregations, the church bell calls followers to recount the faithfulness of Mary, through whom God became incarnate in Christ Jesus. The name "Angelus" derives from the first word of the devotion ("*Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae*" / "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary"), which concludes with this prayer: "Lord, fill our hearts with your love, and as you revealed to us by an angel, the coming of your Son as man. So lead us through his suffering and death to the glory of his resurrection, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen."

Members may note the structuring of daily labor around this devotional prayer, the peasants' sincerity, or the integration of their devotion into a majestic open sky and landscape.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Our Deepest Prayer

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To describe the practice of silent, meditative prayer.
2. To consider why we fear coming silently before God, and how we avoid it.
3. To discuss how we can offer silence to God through the use of silence and meditative prayer in public worship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

This study of the central role of meditative, silent prayer in personal and corporate worship is based on Terry York's hymn, "Waiting Here in Silence, God." The hymn captures the heart of York's experience at DaySpring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, where a more contemplative approach to worship has developed in recent years under the guidance of its first pastor, Burt Burleson, and musical leader, Kurt Kaiser. When he was asked to write this hymn, York recalls, "my wife and I had been members of DaySpring for about a year. The request was that I write some lyrics that describe my thoughts about DaySpring – why we joined and what this worshipping community had come to mean to us. The poetic exercise was a calming and reassuring experience. It was good to identify and capture these thoughts so that they would not fade with routine and familiarity. DaySpring Baptist Church is special – its grounds and buildings, but especially the people that comprise it. DaySpring is a community whose attention to things sacred and simple facilitates listening to the still small voice" (*Prayer*, 59).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for his presence and for speaking to our hearts when we are silent before him.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:26-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Terry York considers the nature of silent, meditative prayer and its role in public worship by reflecting on the lines of his hymn, "Waiting Here in Silence, God." Usually this text is sung as a choral anthem at DaySpring

Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, but Kurt Kaiser has written for this issue an accessible tune for congregational singing (*Prayer*, 64-65). For more information on DaySpring, see www.ourdayspring.org. DaySpring's former pastor Burt Burlinson, who is largely responsible for shaping the congregation's contemplative approach to worship, has contributed worship materials and hymns for three issues of *Christian Reflection*: this issue on *Prayer*, and the previous issues on *Catechism* and *Mysticism* (available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws).

Study Questions

1. Terry York describes it as an attitude of expectant waiting that "involves the entire self: body, mind, and soul." This quieting of the mind "facilitates listening to the still small voice [of God]" and engaging in "the difficult internal conversation of deep prayer." He says, "A particular physical environment" – like the awe and beauty of a sanctuary, or certain cues in worship – "may enhance this stillness and waiting, but the crucial environment is within the geography of the soul, an inner space. Then the prayer is heard." The purpose is not therapeutic relaxation or self-reflection, but a merging of one's own deep and hidden voice, or awareness, with the voice of God's Spirit. The Apostle Paul seems to describe this experience in Romans 8:26-27.
2. York mentions two major sorts of things that we bury and hide from ourselves. We hide the first sort, "sins and failures and destructive emotions," because they make us guilty or ashamed before God and others. The Spirit helps us "own" these, repent of them before God, and receive forgiveness. The second sort of hidden thing is "dreams and hopes that are too wonderful to seriously consider, even though it might well have been God who first whispered their possibility into our hearts and minds." We hide these because of pusillanimity, or the shrinking fear of attempting great, but difficult things. The Spirit helps us "own" these and embrace God's strength in becoming all that we were created to be.
3. Each time we end a prayer by saying "Amen," we are endorsing the content of that prayer. In this case, we are endorsing the time of silent communion with God and accepting the truth of our deepest prayer – whether dream, desire, or confession – that we have heard God's Spirit speak in the silence. This endorsement is a commitment to live differently in the future. "The Amen attaches our prayer to our life, the moment just passed to the future just begun," York observes. "The Amen declares that the words of our deepest prayer will no longer lie trapped, unattended and haunting."
4. Conversion literally means "to turn around." Merton is claiming that meditative prayer is a reorientation of our entire self toward God "in silence, attention, and adoration." York is describing an essential movement in this conversion – the moment of coming to understand, with the Spirit of God's help, who we really are, what we really think, and what we most deeply desire. As long as this deepest self remains hidden from our conscious awareness, we cannot yield it to God for redemption and reorientation.
5. Encourage members to describe some of their experiences of silent, meditative prayer. What were the contexts? As Merold Westphal notes in "Not about Me," the immediate prompt that shapes our prayer "typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth" (*Prayer*, 28). York mentions several elements of the experience: a period of silent waiting, an awareness of merged "voices" – of one's self and God's Spirit – that reveal hidden things, and awareness of God's forgiveness or encouragement. While there certainly is no formula for this spiritual conversation and relationship, have members had similar experiences?
6. At Dayspring, there are a number of short periods of silence throughout the worship service – thirty to sixty seconds after many hymns, special music, readings of Scripture, and prayers, and longer times for silence within "collect" prayers. Often these are planned in advance, but sometimes they are spontaneous. This rhythm of silence establishes an expectation for each member to do some "spiritual work," praying silently through the text of a hymn, hearing God speak through a Scripture passage or a member's spoken prayer.

Departing Hymn

"Waiting Here, In Silence, God" can be found on pp. 64-65 of *Prayer*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.