

LET'S PRAY: THE STUDY AND PRACTICE OF PRAYER
AT FERN CREEK CHRISTIAN CHURCH

by

Richard C. Teske

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To my wife Connie, and our children Abby, Anna and Isaac
through whom I am beginning to understand
the wonder of Christ's love for the church
and the Father's delight in his children

To my mom, Yvonne Teske, who prayed that Jesus
might confront me

To my dad, Carrol Teske, whose tenderness
paved the way for me to accept God's love

To my sister, Yolanda, whose loving
care for our folks to the end
was a daily prayer

And to my in-laws, Chuck & Carol Vaughn,
whose generous love has always
reflected that of our seeking God

VITA

NAME: Richard Carrol Teske

DATE OF BIRTH: April 18, 1962

PLACE OF BIRTH: Fairmont, Minnesota

EDUCATION: Bachelor of Arts, Minnesota Bible College,
Rochester, Minnesota, 1986

Master of Divinity with Concentration in Old
Testament, Emmanuel School of Religion,
Johnson City, Tennessee, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus prayed. Prayer was central to his earthly life and ministry. He spent 40 days prior to his public ministry in solitude being tempted by Satan during which Jesus likely spent a significant amount of time praying. He frequently spent time alone praying (Luke 5:16, 6:12; Mark 1:35). His disciples asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). People brought little children to him for his blessing and his prayers for them (Matthew 19:13). At the end of his life, he prayed in Gethsemane for himself and for his current and future followers (John 17:1, 6, 20). From the cross, Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who executed Him (Luke 23:34-35). Jesus prayed. In fact, his life was framed by prayer.

For Jesus it seems that prayer was as necessary as breathing. As Jesus' disciples, apprentices of his life and ministry, prayer should be as important to us as it was to our Master.¹ He not only provided an example of someone who prayed but Jesus taught his disciples how to pray (Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 11:2-4). With both his example and his teaching how to pray, why is it so hard to pray?

Prayer is weird. In our world, communication with people is difficult. Communication is fraught with static that garbles the signals and what is received and decoded by the receiver is often not the intent of the sender. There are various contributors to the static: language differences, cultural differences, gender differences, socio-economic differences, political differences, racial differences and generational differences. These and other differences create a chasm between sender and receiver and they contribute to certain assumptions that make

¹ By using the past tense, I do not mean to imply that Jesus isn't still alive or still interacting with the Father. Rather, I am using Jesus' incarnate earthly life as an example for our own.

communicating across the void a challenge which requires particular skills to bridge the distance. In addition to these differences the sender's or receiver's life experiences or even emotional experiences in the moment of communication and the difficulty in deciphering body language cues create further challenges to understanding one another. If communication with another human person is challenging for us, no wonder communicating with an unseen person proves so bewildering.

God is unseen. He is Spirit. God's words do not typically come to us in audible tones by which we can hear his intonation or volume in order to discern any meaning clues. God doesn't tap us on the shoulder or slap us in the face or pat us on the back as may happen in some human interactions. We cannot see his face when we speak with him to know whether he is sleeping or intensely interested in what we are trying to communicate. Is he smiling or frowning? How can you tell? A person's response to such impossible questions reveals more about a person's faith than the reality of God's actual response (can Spirit smile?).

We know we should pray. Not only is it following Jesus' example but our own experiences confirm that God does hear and respond. He is the loving Father known and revealed by Jesus to us. However, too often our growth as people of prayer is stunted. Perhaps we have been taught, by word or example, that prayer is primarily asking God for things. As infants cry for food or to have their diapers changed, we get caught in a selfish stage of believing that God should respond to our wants and needs on our time table. A self-centered approach to prayer will not foster growth once the requests (demands?) are not met. Just as there is a need for babies to grow into adulthood, there is equally a need for Jesus' disciples to mature in our understanding and practice of this vital spiritual skill. Because of this foundational need among Jesus' disciples,

including me, a project focused on the study and practice of prayer seemed to be timely and hopefully beneficial.

This thesis describes the curriculum, implementation, and explored outcomes for a project aiming to help Christians deepen their understanding and practice of prayer. I went through this study with a dear group of people that agreed to serve as a focus group. The focus group met for ten weeks during fall 2019 made up of nine participants from the Fern Creek Christian Church (FCCC) in Louisville, KY. FCCC is a suburban church of about 650-700 people who are predominantly white and middle-class. In this congregational context of infants to senior citizens, there is a wide spectrum of spiritual maturity and practice with adults who have been part of a congregation for decades and adults who are new to faith.

The focus group met weekly for the ten weeks to discuss materials and practices I designed for this group study by drawing upon new study and reading on prayer. I believe that there is benefit in “going back to basics” but there is also benefit in stretching beyond our comfort zones. To that end, I sought to provide materials and a context for people to explore and practice various ways of praying that would nourish their souls throughout their lives.

As will be discussed in chapter three, I sought to answer this question: in what ways will participants in a 10-week curriculum and group interaction on the theology and practices of prayer describe how their participation expanded their experiences in prayer? Because prayer was so central to the life and ministry of Jesus, it seems natural to say that it should also be for his followers. How, then, does the church help Jesus followers to grow in prayer so that, through all the experiences of their lives, they might continue to experience a vital connection to the loving Father of Jesus, able to glorify him as Jesus did in life and even through death?

In order to help participants in this study grow, I needed to discern their maturity level prior to the group experience. Therefore, I sought to ascertain where each participant was on a spectrum of experience and maturity. I wanted to find out such things as: What are participants' current prayer practices? How often do participants pray? For how long do they pray? What characterizes these prayer times? What experiences do they have when they pray? Do they have a sense of "consolation" or "desolation," "connection" or "distance" from God? While these may have been secondary questions, they were vital to this study in order to identify participant experiences and help me determine how to conduct group times. Information gleaned helped me focus discussion material and prayer practices to help each participant expand their experiences; enabling them to open themselves further to God's movement in their lives.

As a Christian, I yearn for more than the laughs and fun of good community (while recognizing the vital import of both community as well as joy and celebration). I need a connection with God that is nurturing and nourishing and enables me to carry a cross – whether through cancer or the cushy life in the American suburbs – one that calls me out of myself and empowers me to live there on the edge of discomfort giving myself away and finding wholeness in the cruciform life. As Discipleship Minister at FCCC, I also long to help people grow in relationship with God through Christ.

Therefore, this project sought to provide participants with content and experiences that challenged them to solidify familiar practices and foster new practices of prayer. Chapter two will describe, in summary fashion, the materials that I produced to accomplish this.² Chapter three describes the methods used to assess how the participants themselves described the ways their involvement expanded their experiences in prayer and chapter four discusses some

² All the materials produced for this group are included in the Appendices.

concluding thoughts. First, however, chapter one opens this study conversing with several authors that helped me develop the content and guide our group session conversations as well as determine the practices I asked group members to explore throughout the experience.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

During seminary, I recall a professor telling us that scholarship is done in dialogue. Though I don't recall which of my professors it was, I remember the encouragement. He was challenging us not to get bogged down in the research part of the writing process but rather to see it as a conversation. It is easy to get overwhelmed by the amount of research that is possible on any given subject. Whether working on a paper or a thesis, at some point, you have to stop reading and start writing. Realizing that the task of writing was my response and contribution to a conversation was helpful.

As with any conversation there may be misunderstanding or misinterpretation. I am fascinated by the fact that two people can hear a conversation and get two very different understandings of what was said. If that's the case with people involved in a face-to-face dialogue, how much more with the process of interpreting another person's thoughts on paper. We are not typically in the presence of the authors of the books or articles we use for research. We can't hear their tone or the cadence of their speech. We do not see the twinkle in their eye or the furrow of their brow. We are limited to their words and the way their words strike us. We do our best to understand and seek to interpret their words in line with the author's intent. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we get it wrong. We also recognize that something happens inside us as the conversation continues. There are thoughts and ideas formed in us that may go in directions neither anticipated nor intended by the author. There may be applications we make that the author did not foresee or with which she may disagree. That's the beauty and challenge of any conversation: getting the ideas from one mind transmitted to another and allowing for the results to give birth to further conversation, understanding and exploration.

This chapter seeks to hold a conversation with several authors of books I found helpful in the preparing the participant workbook materials and other books and articles that are part of an ongoing conversation that I am having with these authors about the subject of prayer and ministry. Some of these latter materials provided background for my own nurture and comments in sessions. I am a light weight when it comes to understanding and practicing prayer. When it comes to prayer, I believe what Thomas Merton has said is true, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners, all our life!”³ I am a beginner. I find myself having to return again and again to the basics and so I find books about the basics very helpful. I believed that these sorts of books would also be useful to people in our congregation. However, due to health issues, I also chose this particular topic of study for my own growth and nurture during this part of my journey.⁴ I knew that the stress of a project of this magnitude was not good for someone with cancer. I know that I need to grow in my understanding and practice and I am so grateful for the ways that God has responded to the many prayers prayed by others on my behalf. He has taught me to rely more upon him and the community of Jesus followers around me.

In preparing this project, I have consulted these books to help me provide something beneficial for the people that agreed to be part of this study. Ultimately, I was in search of conversation starters for our group time. I provided some material to encourage their reflection, to foster their thinking, so that when the group met, we could converse about prayer: our experience, the words of others and our own pilgrimages as people of prayer. I was also looking for tools to provide the group members with prayer practices that might expose them to ways of

³ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1969), 37.

⁴ I was diagnosed with low-grade prostate cancer November 2016.

praying they had not experienced. To do so I tried to find resources that would be beneficial for people who had prayed for decades but also would be introductory in nature to be accessible for those who were not as experienced in prayer or accustomed to reading academic or nuanced theological studies on the subject of prayer.

As I proceed, I have categorized the following books under sub-headings I have chosen that correspond to the type of material each book basically represents. These are certainly neither the only nor even the best books available on prayer.⁵ Jesus' followers have had about 2,000 years to reflect upon the practice of prayer. This reflection has provided a vast and varied amount of thoughtful writing about this discipline, far more than I will read in my lifetime. These books include those about which I was already aware and books that were referred to me from professors, a variety of people in the congregation and by friends. I have chosen to discuss these books by categorizing them under the following sub-headings: General Introduction Books, Handbooks and Monastic writings. These authors helped inform my project by providing thematic content upon which to reflect in the workbook materials, foundational material for the beginner, insights for group discussions as well as practical guides for prayer practices that proved new even for those who have prayed for years.

General Introduction Books

This section of books is ideal for people new to prayer. These authors provide basic introductions to prayer while also providing deeper material for those who have more

⁵ For illustrative purposes, typing in "prayer" on Amazon.com yields over 100,000 books not all of which, of course, are books about Christian prayer (or prayer at all). Nonetheless, the vast array of material on the topic of prayer is mind boggling and nearly paralyzing. I recognize the danger of reading about prayer but never praying. This is a danger about which I spoke openly with group participants as a caution regarding the workbook materials.

experience. I selected these books because of their insights into what prayer is and their accessibility to group members, should they choose to pursue further reading about prayer. These books provide insight into various themes such as prayer as conversation and communion with God, prayer as intercession and prayer as a means of God's transformative work in the believer but also as a means of accomplishing God's larger kingdom purposes in the world. They provide helpful direction regarding praying for healing and attending to God by, for instance, slowing down our reading of Scripture through the use of practices such as Lectio Divina. These authors have been a significant help in providing material for prayer practices and for the discussion materials and guiding my thoughts as I directed our group discussions. Let's begin the conversation by turning to these authors.

Teach Us to Pray by Gordon T. Smith is a fine introduction to the practice of prayer that I would not hesitate to put into the hands of anyone in our congregation.⁶ I chose this book specifically because Smith emphasizes the connection between prayer and the kingdom purposes of God and for his understanding of the transformational work of God. It is my hope that participants in the group might look at the references noted in the workbook material and find there direction for further reading and study that would help them in their lives of prayer. Smith also provides insight into petitionary prayer which I shared in the workbook materials.⁷

⁶ Gordon T. Smith, *Teach Us to Pray* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

⁷ See Appendix A, page 155ff. For another very insightful perspective on intercession see Walter Wink, "Prayer and the Powers," in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 297-317. He argues that prayer brings about what can be through the power of God at work against darker powers of domination. He states, "Intercession is spiritual defiance of what is, in the name of what God has promised." Wink, 298.

Selecting the title for his book from the request of Jesus' disciples in Luke 11:1, Smith centers his discussion about prayer around the larger purposes of the reign of God. His chapter titles include: "Prayer and the Kingdom of God," "Praying in the Spirit," "The Prayer of Thanksgiving," "The Prayer of Confession," "The Prayer of Discernment," "Prayer as Spiritual Practice," with an afterword entitled, "Prayer as Petition." Smith keeps the reader centered on God's reign in our midst. In fact, the book is framed by comments emphasizing the importance of the kingdom of God in prayer. Early in the first chapter, Smith notes,

Essentially, then, Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom—for coming of the reign of God. When we pray "thy kingdom come," we are expressing the longing of our hearts and minds that the will of God would happen, on earth as it is in heaven.

It would be a profound understatement to say that this matters. For indeed nothing matters more. Nothing.⁸

And the book closes,

Petition assumes thanksgiving, confession, and discernment. But more, petition is really, in the end, nothing other than praying "thy kingdom come" in the lives of those we love, "thy kingdom come" within our church communities, and "thy kingdom come" within the cities where we live, the countries we call home, and the world that so deeply needs to know the saving power of the reign of Christ. This is our prayer.⁹

I applaud this singular focus not as mere organizing motif but as the center of the life of prayer.

The supremacy and authority of Christ is lifted up as central to prayer. It is that which we seek

⁸ Smith, *Teach Us*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108. Two other works that specifically examine the Lord's Prayer include: N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and Hilda C. Graef, trans, *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Lord's Prayer and The Beatitudes*, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, No. 18, edited by Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe (New York: Newman, 1954). For a more technical analysis of the Lord's Prayer, specifically the phrase, "your will be done" and its intratextual relationship with Jesus' experience and prayer in Gethsemane, see James N. Neumann, "Thy Will Be Done: Jesus's Passion in the Lord's Prayer," *JBL* 138, no. 1 (2019): 161-182. For an examination of the various rhetorical figures and the way in which they affect the meaning of the Lord's Prayer when spoken see, David Seal, "The Lord's Prayer Prayed," *Restoration Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2019): 77-86.

and to that we defer. Christ's reign in the life of the one who prays is characterized by thanksgiving, confession, discernment and the regular pattern or rhythm of prayer.

According to Smith, praying for the kingdom of God is not merely a request for God to do his will but is also seen as a way of participating in the reign of God now as the one praying is formed by the work of God's Spirit as we are aligned with the kingdom purposes of Christ. Thanksgiving, confession and discernment are three movements that Smith believes characterize the prayer of the one seeking God's reign in life. These three movements are contrasted with complaint, judgmentalism and despair or frenetic busyness. Complaint as opposed to thanksgiving, having a judgmental, critical spirit as opposed to open confession of sin and despair or frenetic busyness as opposed to discernment, characterize the natural mode of our flesh and thus we need the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to become the sort of people in whom Christ's reign is made evident. Becoming people who are grateful in all circumstances, able to confess our sins confident in God's love and the relationship that he has established, and who readily recognize how God is calling us to participate in his kingdom purposes are evidence of the Spirit working in us through prayer. I am especially struck, in this regard, by Smith's comments that God is the one who is at work to accomplish his good ends. "We can do our work confident that God is the builder (Psalm 127:1). We are not called to more and more and more; we are not called to be heroes; we are only called to do what we are called to do. No more and no less."¹⁰

The final chapter of this book is an encouragement to be persistent in prayer. The transformational work of God happens in our lives in slow, incremental ways requiring daily

¹⁰ Smith, *Teach Us*, 76.

consistency. He notes, “We long for our lives to be caught up in the kingdom, to seek the kingdom more than anything else (Matthew 6:33). And this requires persistent prayers—ideally daily—for the very simple reason that the impact of our prayers is their cumulative effect.”¹¹

Though this book is concise, it touches on many practical and theologically meaningful points regarding prayer. I am confident that someone new to faith and prayer would be initiated well with regard to the practice of prayer. Likewise, the person who has prayed for decades will be encouraged afresh to consider ways in which prayer is far deeper than what many people experience.

Another general, yet thorough, book I found very encouraging is *For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer* by Bonnie Thurston.¹² This is another book I would not hesitate to put into the hand of someone looking to learn the basics about prayer. It would benefit someone who wanted to be introduced to some ancient prayer practices as well. Thurston dives deeper into ancient practices of prayer than Smith and she does an excellent job of tying eminently practical approaches to prayer with a nuanced understanding of historical spirituality. Though I quoted from Thurston only once in the main body of the workbook materials, regarding prayer being a response to God’s initiative, she introduces classic approaches to prayer such as Lectio Divina,

¹¹ Smith, *Teach Us*, 93.

¹² Bonnie Thurston, *For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

the Jesus Prayer as well as the prayer of waiting.¹³ I referenced Thurston in the Prayer Practices of Lectio Divina and the Jesus Prayer as she gives simple explanations for these practices.¹⁴

Thurston is an educator and begins her discussion of the practice of prayer from the foundation of theology. She begins with definitions of prayer and provides one of the best overall definitions of prayer I have read. I did not share this definition with the participants in my study group because I opted to keep the definition of prayer shared in that context as crisp and simple as possible.¹⁵ However, I think Thurston's definition is theologically rich and insightful. She states, "prayer is the attentiveness to God's presence that restores God's original image in and intention for us, for human beings. Prayer is a mode of being."¹⁶ She goes on to note that, "ultimately, [prayer is] to rest in God's presence in loving adoration. Generally this process begins by descending with the mind (*nous*) into the heart (*kardia*)."¹⁷

¹³ See Appendix B, page 166.

¹⁴ See Appendix B, pages 166-168, 75-176. The importance of the Jesus Prayer in the Eastern Church's monastic life may be seen in E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, trans, *Writings from the Philokalia On Prayer of the Heart*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1951).

¹⁵ See Appendix A, page 119 where I define prayer as conversation with God.

¹⁶ Thurston, 11. I believe that being attentive is vital for prayer. However, this attentiveness need not be some feeling mustered up by the one praying. For example, Eugene Peterson notes, that in the midst of congregational life, prayer isn't conditioned or authenticated by the feelings of the pastor called to pray. "Nothing is more devastating to prayer than when I begin to evaluate prayer by my feelings, and think that in order to pray I have to have a certain sense, a certain spiritual attentiveness or peace or, on the other side, anguish. That's virtually impossible to learn by yourself. But if I'm in a congregation, I learn over and over again that prayer will go on whether I feel like it or not, or even if I sleep through the whole thing." Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 9.

¹⁷ Thurston, 11.

This understanding of prayer being a practice of attentiveness to the presence and work of God that restores God's image in us is something that encouraged me to focus, during group sessions, on "attending to" God in prayer. I tried to help our group members determine ways of dealing with distractions or thoughts that strayed away from a focus on God's presence in order better to attend to God.

Though not a general introduction to prayer, Thomas Keating's book, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*, is consonant with a movement into one's heart but takes it further in that he conceives of centering prayer as preparatory for other forms of prayer. I include it here because of its connection with the theme of attending to God through this particular practice Keating identifies as Centering Prayer. He refers to this type of prayer as primarily receptive rather than discursive or, we might say, cognitive. "Centering Prayer is not a concentrative practice, nor an exercise of *attention*. It is an exercise of *intention*. It is our will, our faculty of choice, that we are cultivating."¹⁸ Keating provides a definition in his glossary of terms: "Centering Prayer: A contemporary form of Prayer of the Heart, Prayer of Simplicity, Prayer of Faith, Prayer of Simple Regard; a method of reducing the obstacles to the gifts of contemplative prayer and of facilitating the development of habits conducive to responding to the inspiration of the Spirit."¹⁹ Ultimately, this is a way of resting in the presence of the God who loves us and whose Spirit indwells us. It is a recognition that God does not need to be informed and we do not need to provide him with a list of our needs or instructions about what he should do. It is to be in his presence intentionally open to his presence and love. This is done with a

¹⁸ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad, 1994), 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

word that focuses one's intention to be present with God and allows thoughts to be released in order to be present with God. While I sought to help group members quiet the inner voices that scramble for attention and tend to distract during prayer, I used Keating only sparingly (once to reference an idea regarding Lectio Divina in the prayer practices) due to the confusing nature of his descriptions.²⁰

Dallas Willard is an author I deeply respect and appreciate. He was Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and an expert in Christian spiritual formation who taught in USC Dornsife's School of Philosophy for 47 years.²¹ I have found his writing on spiritual formation to be deeply profound, sometimes confounding but always penetrating and fruitful. It is basically Willard's definition of prayer that I shared with group participants in session two material: prayer is conversation with God. Specifically, Willard states, "Prayer is conversing, communicating with God."²² I sought to emphasize this ongoing conversation as a primary motif in session discussions of prayer whether discussing the workbook material or the prayer practices. I reminded group participants frequently of Willard's assertion that the point of praying, or any spiritual discipline, is not praying itself but communion with God; or as Willard states it, the "effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of

²⁰ See Appendix B, page 166 for that reference. Regarding centering prayer Calvin Miller notes, "Centering prayers are interested in relationship, not answers. Centering prayer wants God alone—all of God—more of God—only God." Calvin Miller, *Into the Depths of God: Where Eyes See the Invisible, Ears Hear the Inaudible, and Minds Conceive the Inconceivable*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2000), 109.

²¹ Susan Bell, "In Memoriam: Dallas Willard, 77," News at USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California, May 10, 2013, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://dornsifecms.usc.edu/news/stories/1401/in-memoriam-dallas-willard-77/>.

²² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 184.

normal existence where we are placed.”²³ This harkens back to what Thurston intended by noting the restorative work of prayer. Willard contends that spiritual disciplines are practiced to affect change in the one practicing them. We are formed to be more like Jesus by prayer or solitude or fasting or silence. Early in this book, Willard laments, “If the steady, longtime faithful devotees to our ministries are not transformed in the substance of their lives to the full range of Christlikeness, they are being failed by what we are teaching them.”²⁴

Willard places prayer in the category he identifies as disciplines of engagement rather than a discipline of abstinence.²⁵ He perceives prayer as “a way of co-laboring with God to accomplish good things and advance his Kingdom purposes.”²⁶ In arguing against those who regard prayer as irrelevant he states, “No doubt many things called ‘prayer’ are quite useless in every respect, but nothing is more relevant to social conditions than the transformation of persons that comes from prayer at its best in the life of the disciple of Christ.”²⁷ Prayer is a precious gift from God to us. Sadly, Willard notes, “The ‘open secret’ of many ‘Bible believing’ churches is that a vanishingly small percentage of those talking about prayer and Bible reading are actually doing what they are talking about.”²⁸ This emphasis upon becoming more like Christ through the disciplines is echoed in his other books as well.

²³ Willard, *The Spirit*, 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

Early in *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, Willard

warns:

But one who inquires seriously after God's guidance must never forget that even if one was to do all the particular things God wants and explicitly commands us to do, one might still not be the person God would have one be. It is always true that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). An obsession merely with *doing* all God commands may be the very thing that rules out *being* the kind of person that he calls us to be.²⁹

The way in which the various disciplines form us into people who are more Christlike is precisely the concern that Willard teaches over and over. He is intensely interested in demonstrating that we are to become the sort of people that Jesus would be if he were living our lives. This happens through the instrumentality of the spiritual disciplines. However, it is not the discipline that changes us, rather it is God who changes us through particular practices.

The above quote should not be heard as somehow disparaging the Scriptures in the process of hearing God or in the relational interaction one has with God. Later in the book Willard declares, "His speaking most commonly occurs in conjunction with study of and reflection on the Bible, the written Word of God, wherever the Bible is available."³⁰ In this context, he does not limit the ways that God may speak only to reflecting upon the Bible but he does identify it as most common. This book outlines the many ways one might hear God and

²⁹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 11.

³⁰ Ibid., 195. Willard also addresses ways of discerning God's voice. In this regard, Ruth Barton has written an excellent book for communal discernment which our elders and staff team have read with great benefit. Ruth Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). St. Ignatius also has "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits" in Anthony Mottola, trans., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (New York: Image Books, 1989), 129-134. Gordon Smith has also written on the subject. Gordon Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

these are very helpful. Here I am most concerned with Willard's ongoing interest in the formative nature of God's interaction with us. God does his transformative work in us as we humbly seek him and walk with him in relationship. His further emphasis in this book on our attentiveness and discernment is a vital corrective to our tendency to speak more than we listen.

This transformative effect of the spiritual disciplines and life lived with God is a central concern in Willard's book, *Renovation of the Heart*. There he summarizes sanctification.

It is a consciously chosen and sustained relationship of interaction between the Lord and his apprentice, in which the apprentice is able to do, and routinely does, what he or she knows to be right before God because all aspects of his or her person have been substantially transformed... It comes about through the process of spiritual formation, through which the heart (spirit, will) of the individual and the whole inner life take on the character of Jesus' inner life.³¹

While I did not use this last book in the workbook materials, all of these encouragements from Dallas Willard echoed in my ears as I discussed prayer with group participants. It is too easy for prayer to be a task. It is possible to practice it as a one-sided conversation, an airing of one's needs before God without taking the time to listen for his voice. It changes things to think of it as a dialogue with God who changes us over time through the interaction. I sought to remind our group that just like ongoing conversations help us get to know and build relationships with other people, prayer builds the relationship with God.

M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. defines spiritual formation as "a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others."³² After walking through that definition in the first four chapters of his book, he discusses the role of personality as the vehicle for the journey. I

³¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 226.

³² M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 12.

used this section of Mulholland's work to help group members recognize that we are all wired with particular preferences and that is normal.³³ He uses the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as a way of demonstrating that we have preferences toward which we lean and these preferences are why we find particular spiritual disciplines nourishing. In the workbook materials, I quote a lengthy story that illustrates the importance of recognizing the way that we're wired.³⁴ It highlights the importance of knowing what nourishes us best.

On the other hand, Mulholland also points out the importance of recognizing that we are whole people and our preferences do not make up our totality. Insightfully, he notes:

Left to ourselves in the development of our spiritual practices, we will generally gravitate to those spiritual activities that nurture our preferred pattern of being and doing. The shadow side of our preference pattern will languish unattended and unnurtured. ... The results of such one-sided spirituality can be devastating to our spiritual pilgrimage. The undernourished shadow side will, sooner or later, demand equal time. Not having any holistic spiritual patterns for its expression, it will usually manifest itself in 'unspiritual' behaviors which are both antithetical to holistic spirituality and destructive to the spiritual activities of our preferred patterns.³⁵

Mulholland's interest is to encourage Jesus followers to open our entire being to the transforming power of Christ. He advocates a balanced spiritual formation in which God rules all aspects of our hearts. "Holistic spirituality is a pilgrimage of deepening responsiveness to God's control of our life and being."³⁶ This is accomplished through "the journey" of spiritual disciplines.

In this third section of his book, Mulholland identifies the classic Christian pilgrimage as consisting of Awakening, Purgation, Illumination and Union with God. Prayer is part of this

³³ See session 6 in Appendix A, pages 144ff.

³⁴ See Appendix A, page 146-147.

³⁵ Mulholland, 57-58.

³⁶ Ibid., 168.

journey, as a classic discipline, not as an instrument to accomplish our ends but as primarily relational through which we seek to belong wholly to God. Such prayer, he describes,

is the act by which the people of God become incorporated into the presence and action of God in the world. Prayer becomes a sacrificial offering of ourselves to God, to become agents of God's presence and action in the daily events and situations of our lives. How different this is from the idea of prayer as asking God to change our situation without any involvement on our part!³⁷

He goes on in this section to point out the way in which disciplines transform us and the way in which our control structures hinder the work of God to change our being.

Finally, I appreciate the way that Mulholland challenges the exclusively individual way in which many pray. He notes that we have “companions on the way” in the fourth section of his book. In this section, I find his insights into what he terms “corporate spirituality” very helpful and I shared these within the context of our group. He notes that the corporate dimension of spirituality supports our individual practice.

In the first place, the community of faith is the living reality within which the classical spiritual disciplines nurture us and provide the support structure for our personal disciplines. ... In the second place, when God begins to work with us at the deep levels of our incompleteness and brokenness, our bondage and sin, we need the body of Christ to support, encourage, challenge and nurture us toward wholeness. We may be able to work through some of our bondage and brokenness alone with God. But when God begins to deal with some of the deep distortions of our being we need others.³⁸

Both of these, corporate support and corporate accountability, are vital for our transformation into Christlikeness.

³⁷ Mulholland, 108.

³⁸ Ibid., 146. These comments remind me of the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair. Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 78.

The importance of corporate prayer is the topic of John Onwuchekwa's book, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church*. In the introduction, he notes that in most worship gatherings of the church on a Sunday one might hear music and singing, a sermon, perhaps witness a baptism, Scripture reading and the Lord's Supper. "But you know what you probably wouldn't see a lot of? Or participate in? Prayer."³⁹ Though this book can, at times, seem like it's all over the map due to the varied sub-topics of the material, this primary point comes through. Prayer is often missing from the context of our worship and congregational life. It has been relegated to opening a meeting rather than being central to it. It has become perfunctory and largely lacks the important role it played in both Jesus' life and that of the early church. Onwuchekwa calls it breathing.

Breathing—as a metaphor for Christian prayer—captures so much of what prayer should be. It reminds us that prayer is something essential to our existence. Breathing is necessary for everything we do. It enables every activity. Likewise, prayer is basic and vital. It's tied to both our present existence and perpetual endurance.⁴⁰

Breathing is necessary for the individual and for the church. Without prayer in the church, there is no life.

In this book, Onwuchekwa discusses the nature of the Lord's prayer as a communal practice that serves as a model for the church community. I sought to emphasize, within group sessions, that we learn to pray by praying with others. When we pray, we often form our prayers based on models we have heard. Therefore, it is vital that the congregation spends time together in prayer. He also references the use of the acrostic prayer ACTS and gets very practical in

³⁹ John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

outlining what to do in a prayer meeting and what to expect in carrying it out. He accentuates the importance of prayer for the mission of the church in the last chapter of his book noting that missionaries, as Jesus taught in Luke 10:2, come from God responding to the prayers of his people. I appreciated the simplicity of this book and the several insightful illustrations that I used in the context of the session discussion times.

Bill Thrasher has also written a helpful general introduction to the practice of prayer. While I did not quote from this work in the workbook materials, I did provide the list of “Selected Prayers from Scripture” he provides in Appendix 1 of the book.⁴¹ I also drew on some of his comments for my own comments in group sessions. Thrasher seeks to encourage people who are anxious about prayer and may be uncertain that they know how to pray or grow in prayer. He covers much territory in his book and here I will point toward some of the things I found helpful for the purposes of my own comments during group meetings.

Thrasher offers helpful insight into praying in Jesus’ name. He suggests that this involves praying consistent with the character of Jesus as well as praying that which will enhance Jesus’ reputation. He observes that we also come to God in Jesus’ authority not our own, for God through Christ invites us to approach God in the name of his son who died to secure us every spiritual blessing in himself.⁴² Jesus’ patterns of prayer are used as a model for our lives of prayer. In so doing, we grow in intimacy with the Father and he notes, “We must remember that the goal is to develop a lifestyle of prayer in which we continually share our heart with God. The

⁴¹ Bill Thrasher, *A Journey to Victorious Praying: Finding Discipline and Delight in Your Prayer Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 241-249.

⁴² Thrasher, 30.

exact habits or forms will not be the same for every person.”⁴³ Such openness leads to more intimacy with God and brings great joy to the person praying. Thrasher even suggests that we ask God to enable us to get “addicted to the joy of prayer.”⁴⁴

Thrasher’s encouragements to turn temptations into prayer reminded me of advice I once received from a friend and spiritual director to use distractions as part of my prayer. Thrasher suggests, “Purpose to let every point of temptation lead you into a conversation with God and trust him to meet the deepest thirsts of your heart.”⁴⁵ He provides examples of this later when he states,

What if every time you are tempted to think an impure thought, you pray for the purity of your children? What if every time you are tempted to be discouraged or fearful, you prayed for God to fill your spiritual leaders with the Holy Spirit? The key is to ask God what He wants you to pray.⁴⁶

Group participants found such practical, matter-of-fact advice very helpful. His pragmatic tendencies do not end there. He also has particular advice regarding fasting and prayer and how to incorporate Scriptures directly into one’s prayers.⁴⁷

One of the things that Thrasher encourages is more reliance upon the Holy Spirit for both motivation for our prayer life but also relying upon him to guide us in prayer.⁴⁸ This latter instruction is something for which I am very grateful to Rick Richardson and the instruction he

⁴³ Thrasher, 126.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 165ff.; 101ff.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 47ff.

provides in this regard especially in the context of interceding for others. I referred to Richardson's work in session 8 of the workbook materials regarding the topic of intercession and missional praying.⁴⁹

I am struck by the way in which Richardson seeks to be open to the Spirit's guidance simply by asking and listening for that leading. With regard to a friend for whom he was praying, he notes, "...I would ask Jesus how he was praying for the people I cared about. For example, I asked Jesus what he most wanted for my friend Bruce, what he was praying for Bruce's life."⁵⁰ This open invitation to the Lord for his guidance in prayer is one of the most profound and practical teachings I have ever received about prayer. There is much to be thankful for in Richardson's book. He invites the reader to receive healing from God describing what healing is and providing a map for the journey toward it. He further addresses specific issues of gender identity and healing wounds received from parents, harmful memories, sexual addiction and abuse. Throughout, Richardson reminds us of the redemptive suffering of Christ provided not only for our forgiveness but our transformation. In a moving passage, he states

And hell has a grip on us now as long as we remain locked in negative images and destructive inner words about who we are that we received and believed from an early age. As long as we believe those voices and act accordingly, we remain immature, frustrated and stunted in our growth into personhood.

Jesus didn't die and rise again just to forgive us when we fail. He died and rose again that we might be transformed, that we might receive and believe the new name and fulfilled identity he calls us into. We become ourselves as we hear and obey God's healing and directing word. As we act in accord with our true name and our real identity, we become who we were created to be. ...⁵¹

We got a new self, which is our real self, through our union with Christ.⁵²

⁴⁹ See Appendix A, page 156-157.

⁵⁰ Rick Richardson, *Experiencing Healing Prayer: How God Turns our Hurts into Wholeness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 73.

⁵¹ At this point he quotes Ephesians 4:22-24.

These admonitions rang loud in my ear as I saw the looks in certain participant's eyes and heard different comments from group members.

There is a significant need among the members of the body of Christ to believe and come in contact with our belovedness. This is why I spent time in group sessions talking about the fact that God delights in us as his children. This echoes the writing of Brennan Manning. Manning states this in various ways in his books but this comes from the chapter, "The Love of Jesus" in his book, *The Signature of Jesus*,

... the stunning disclosure that God is love has had negligible impact on the majority of Christians and minimal transforming power. The problem seems to be that either we don't know it, or know it but cannot accept it; or we accept it, but are not in touch with it; or we are in touch with it, but do not surrender to it.⁵³

To rest in the love of God and to respond to his love in the intimacy of a conversational relationship is to accept our acceptance and surrender to him.

This hunger for the love of God connects with what Ruth Barton describes as our longings. She recognizes that the busy rush of the church's calendar does little to address or attend to the longings in each of us. She identifies,

The longing for significance, the longing for love, the longing for deep and fundamental change the longing for a way of life that works, the longing to connect experientially and even viscerally with Someone beyond ourselves—these longings led me to search out spiritual practices and establish life rhythms that promised something more.⁵⁴

Noting that it is impossible to change our own hearts, we need to establish a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep us open and available to God. This journey, Barton contends, begins by

⁵² Richardson, 102-103.

⁵³ Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 163.

⁵⁴ Ruth Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 11.

recognizing these longings and attending to these deep desires in the presence of God. Doing so challenges the ways in which we have defined ourselves apart from connection with God.

Allowing God to confront us in our deepest desires is the beginning of allowing him to do his transforming work in us.

Jesus asked people what they wanted him to do for them (cf. Mark 10:51, John 5:6-9).

Using Jesus' example as a springboard, Barton concludes,

Jesus' interactions with the people he came in contact with during his life on earth make it clear that desire, and the willingness to name that desire in Christ's presence, is a catalytic element of the spiritual life. It is one of the most powerful motivators for a life lived consistently with intentionality and focus. Beyond that, the willingness to open up this tender and sometimes volatile place in Christ's presence is part of the intimacy we seek. Somehow it creates the possibility for Christ to be with us in a way that meets our truest need.⁵⁵

It is upon this foundation that Barton discusses the various disciplines in the rest of her book. In particular I referenced her work regarding solitude and honoring the body in the workbook materials.⁵⁶ I also utilized her thoughts regarding Lectio Divina and a rule of life in the prayer practices for group participants.⁵⁷ I sought to highlight the above thoughts during our group discussions. Helping people identify what is really in their hearts is a challenging thing. Speaking what we really feel and think about ourselves and about God is about as difficult as performing

⁵⁵ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 27.

⁵⁶ See Appendix A, pages 137, 139 and 144-146.

⁵⁷ See Appendix B, pages 166-168 and 186. The rule of life material I pulled from the *Sacred Rhythms* participant's guide; a separate volume referenced in the Appendix. Her book dedicated to the recovery of retreat, as a spiritual practice, describes the importance, benefits, elements, helpful encouragement and guidance for structuring a spiritual retreat. Ruth Barton, *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

heart surgery without anesthetic. It can hurt to reveal our hearts to ourselves, others and God.⁵⁸

Creating a rhythm of growing intimacy with the Father, as Barton suggests, opens us up to being changed by God.⁵⁹

Richard Foster also writes about the discipline of solitude and silence as part of the outward disciplines he identifies that help people grow deeper in their faith journey. He begins his book by lamenting, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”⁶⁰ In this regard he notes that various classic spiritual disciplines of the Christian life move us to a life of depth. His entire book is an excellent overview of spiritual disciplines and has become a classic itself as has his book dedicated to prayer, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*.

Though I did not quote from Foster’s book exploring prayer, it is a treasure in which he examines multiple kinds of prayer. I appreciate his thoughtful movement from bringing

⁵⁸ As Manning observes, “Only in a relationship of the deepest intimacy can we allow another person to know us as we truly are. It is difficult enough for us to live with the awareness of our stinginess and shallowness, our anxieties and infidelities, but to disclose our dark secrets to another is intolerably risky. The impostor does not want to come out of hiding. He will grab for the cosmetic kit and put on his pretty face to make himself ‘presentable.’” Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 163.

⁵⁹ Tony Jones has also written a useful introduction to spiritual disciplines with an epilogue in which he encourages developing a rule of life as well. I quote from Jones in session 5 of the workbook materials regarding silence and solitude. Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). For a different perspective on a particular day of solitude experience see, Larry Crabb, “One Day of Silence and Solitude,” *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* 5, no. 2 (Fall / Winter 2007): 20-27.

⁶⁰ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 1.

ourselves into God’s presence with what is on our hearts, which he identifies as “simple prayer,” to further discussion about transformation, then intimacy and finally ministry. Prayer moves us out of ourselves into connection and intimacy with God who makes us radical servants of his good news in the world. As Foster states, “Transformation and intimacy both cry out for ministry. We are led through the furnace of God’s purity not just for our own sake but also for the sake of others. We are drawn up into the bosom of God’s love not merely to experience acceptance but also so we can give his love to others.”⁶¹

My aim, in the group session materials, discussions and practices, was to provide a broad experience of prayer for both beginners and seasoned practitioners, one of the primary themes that arose in the times together was the importance of an intimate connection with God. I sought to help group participants understand that they are loved and God delights in them. God is “the heart’s true home.”⁶² I also sought to help the group express their hearts to God so that they might open themselves to him and be transformed. As Foster notes, “The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are increasingly conformed to the image of the Son.”⁶³

This communion with the Father is something that A. W. Tozer wrote about in *The Pursuit of God*. Tozer is convinced that knowing God personally is possible and it is possible because God seeks to draw people to himself. God’s initiative in seeking relationship with

⁶¹ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2003), Kindle reader e-book, Part III introduction, 304.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Part II introduction, 142. Also, in this regard, I appreciate Foster’s early comments, “Loving is the syntax of prayer. To be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers.” *Prayer*, Kindle reader e-book, introduction, 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 101.

humanity is met with a responding impulse to follow hard after God. In the preface of the book, Tozer argues for more than mere theological conviction or knowing words.

Sound Bible exposition is an imperative *must* in the Church of the Living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.⁶⁴

Tozer expresses this conviction throughout the book stating that it is possible to know God and have fellowship with him.

This conviction is something that I sought to express through the conversations about prayer in our sessions. It is something that I need personally and it is something that the participants in the group desired as well. Tozer later states, “The Bible assumes as a self-evident fact that men [sic] can know God with at least the same degree of immediacy as they know any other person or thing that comes within the field of their experience.”⁶⁵ Tozer published these words sometime in 1948. Somewhere along the way this conviction, among the people of God, has floundered but the nagging hunger for it remains.

Another twentieth century author, Frank Laubach, expresses the power of prayer in his book, *Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World*. Laubach was a remarkable teacher, missionary and mystic. In 1929 he settled among the Moros tribe on Mindanao. He developed a technique for reducing the Moro language to writing using symbols closely correlated to their spoken

⁶⁴ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 9-10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

words. His famous “Each One Teach One” program was birthed from this experience.⁶⁶

Published at the close of World War II, this book on prayer advocates peace for the world that might come about through prayer. “We need cool heads to do the right thing—to put out the fires of hate and prejudice, if our ship earth is to survive—and prayer will quench hate, fear and panic when nothing else will do it.”⁶⁷ In this book, Laubach argues for prayers to be prayed for world leaders in order to establish peace.

We can do more for the world with prayer than if we could walk into Whitehall, London, or the Kremlin in Moscow, and tell those men what to do—far more! If they listened to our suggestions, we would probably be more or less wrong. But what God tells them, when they listen to Him, must be right. It is infinitely better for world leaders to listen to God than for them to listen to us.⁶⁸

Surely, we are in a time in history when the leaders of the world need prayer and to hear from God.

Later, Laubach advocates various prayer experiments. His hope is that we grow closer to the continual prayer that Paul commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. He states, “If you keep sending flash prayers every time you think about it, without ever an exception, after a while you

⁶⁶ Dallas Willard, “Frank Laubach’s Letters by a Modern Mystic,” <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/frank-laubachs-letters-by-a-modern-mystic> (accessed January 24, 2020). See also “Laubach, Frank Charles (1884-1970) Congregational missionary and apostle of world literacy,” Biographies at Boston University School of Theology, History of Missiology, <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/l-m/laubach-frank-charles-1884-1970/> (accessed January 24, 2020).

⁶⁷ Frank Laubach, *Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2012), 9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16. The language that he uses to do this seems strange. “If ten million praying people in the United States stopped for a few seconds several times every day to flash a prayer at the President or our Senators, they would feel a gentle spiritual power almost lifting them out of their chairs.” *Ibid.*, 17-18. This language of praying “at” people is consistent throughout the book and seems a strange “direction” for prayer.

will find it is second nature.”⁶⁹ Laubach’s prayer experiments sought to have one’s mind on Christ as much as possible throughout the hours of one’s day. There was a missional goal to this encouragement toward ongoing prayer. “The greatest way to help Christ conquer the world is to saturate our own minds with Him.”⁷⁰ Laubach’s experience and example are especially encouraging as we seek to intercede for others.

Some of what Laubach wrote about prayer and the *way* he wrote about it is strange. However, his challenge to draw close to Christ by ongoing prayer experiments is much needed. There is great need for the people of God to take seriously the call to prayer and we need practical steps toward making prayer a regular part of our day-to-day life. Only through ongoing conversational relationship with God will we become the people God desires us to be.

These books provided much helpful material for the workbook and prayer practices as well as informed my own thoughts and comments during group discussions. Willard helps us see that prayer is conversation with God that transforms us. The many helpful insights from Richardson about how to pray for others by asking Jesus what he is praying for our friends are outstanding, reflected also by Thrasher. Smith’s keen focus prayer being intimately tied to God accomplishing his kingdom purposes in and through us helped me point the group participants to the larger contexts of prayer. Onwuchekwa’s challenges regarding the necessity of prayer in community played a vital role in encouraging me to include the prayer partner experience as part of this project. Thurston’s contributions to this conversation were significant. She provides a thorough introduction to prayer for the beginner and for those who wish to explore more historic practices of prayer like Lectio. Her encouragement to attend to God was also key in group

⁶⁹ Laubach, 68.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 73.

discussions. Brennan Manning's contribution regarding our belovedness was key to comments in materials and in discussions regarding God delighting in us as his children. These themes that rose from these authors were particularly helpful for the ongoing conversations with the group participants in this study.

Handbooks

Common definitions of a handbook may include that it is a "manual" for operating something or it is a "reference" work on a specific subject or it serves as a "guide" for a particular practice. I have selected the following books because of their very practical suggestions and guidance for prayer. These books provided helpful directions for prayer practices such as a guide for praying for an hour or directions for prayer walking which I provided to study participants to try throughout the week between group sessions. These books also provide an introduction to a variety of disciplines for spiritual formation that would be beneficial far beyond the scope of this project. Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* is full of brief introductions to a variety of disciplines vital to spiritual formation. I also include in this section a few brief comments about books of prayers which I find helpful in providing us with vocabulary beyond our own but which I did not use in the context of the group materials or discussion sessions. I provide them here as background noting that these have been of benefit to me in my own prayer journey.

The *Zúme Guidebook* is a very practical e-book designed to make and multiply disciples. This guidebook contains multiple exercises that are basic to the life of a disciple and I used several of them in the prayer practices for our group. Each of the portions used from this guidebook are perfectly suited for passing along to group members for step-by-step approach to

the particular practice. Each of the following practices, which I referenced in the prayer practices Appendix of this study, are also described in the Zúme Project online training.⁷¹ The S.O.A.P.S. approach to Bible study is a way of helping a person slow down and ask questions of the Scripture and then to journal about the text and one's reflection upon it.⁷² The Prayer Cycle provides guidance for praying for an hour segmenting prayer into twelve five-minute increments including: praise, waiting, confession, intercession, meditating, praying scripture and more.⁷³ The instructions regarding prayer walking are particularly helpful in that they are brief but provide beneficial perspective on this important ministry of prayer. The instruction includes ways of seeing the area in which you are walking and for which you are praying as well as a prayer acronym, B.L.E.S.S., to remind the person praying to pray for one's neighbors regarding their Body (health), Labor (job and finances), Emotional (morale), Social (relationships), and Spiritual (knowing and loving God more) well-being.⁷⁴

In her fine book, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun admits that her book, “won’t make you disciplined, fix your spiritual life or force something to happen in your soul. A book can never make God appear on demand. But this book can give you a way of following your heart’s desire into the arms of God.”⁷⁵ She does an

⁷¹ *Zúme Guidebook*, https://storage.googleapis.com/zume-file-mirror/en/33_en_zume_guidebook.pdf (accessed January 27, 2020). Zúme Project training videos, <https://zume.training/training/#panel1> (accessed January 27, 2020).

⁷² *Zúme Guidebook*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-18.

⁷⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 21.

amazing job introducing sixty-two different spiritual disciplines. In addition, she provides very useful appendices regarding planning for one's spiritual growth to suggestions for groups, mentors, spending time with God and outlining seasons of the spiritual life, and more. I referenced this work in the student workbook in the discussion about fasting.⁷⁶ I also referred to her work in the prayer practices regarding the discipline of journaling.⁷⁷

Each of the disciplines that Calhoun introduces begins with a table that outlines the desire for practicing this discipline, a list of relevant scriptures supporting the discipline, a description of what the practice includes and the anticipated fruit that may be borne from practicing the discipline. Within two to four pages the discipline is then discussed followed by reflection questions, exercises and titles of additional resources. This is a phenomenal resource for the Jesus follower wishing to be introduced to a wide range of spiritual disciplines. It is a useful resource for group leaders wishing to deepen the practices of their group.

A similar resource is the Renovaré resource, *Devotional Classics*.⁷⁸ This book contains classic authors such as Gregory of Nyssa, John of the Cross, Kierkegaard, C. S. Lewis, Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, Dallas Willard and more. Their writings are ordered in sections by these topics: Preparing for the Spiritual Life, The Prayer-Filled Life, The Virtuous Life, The Spirit-Empowered Life, The Compassionate Life and The Word-Centered Life. The five latter sections correspond to the five great streams of Christian life identified by Renovaré. Each contribution within each section includes an introduction to the author, the author's excerpt, a

⁷⁶ See Appendix A, page 142-143.

⁷⁷ See Appendix B, page 173.

⁷⁸ Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, eds., *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993).

portion of Scripture, reflection questions, suggested exercises pertaining to the topic, a brief reflection by Richard Foster and closes with suggestions for further exploration of the excerpt author's writings or life. This work provides access to fifty-two authors who have stood the test of time and whose writings help transform the reader seeking to tune into the presence of God, the way of Jesus and to open oneself to the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁹

Moving from guides that introduce several disciplines or authors, *Prayer-Walking: Praying on Site with Insight* focuses on one prayer practice. Though not necessarily a handbook, the authors say they have “stuffed this guide with a wealth of practical ideas which apply to all kinds of situations.”⁸⁰ They go on to state that their book is “more of a menu than a manual” encouraging the reader to pick and choose suggestions given that best fit with what God is already doing in one's context.⁸¹ Therefore, I have included this book in this section of this survey.

I am grateful for the way in which Hawthorne and Kendrick provide very applicable, practical advice to introduce the discipline of prayerwalking, a term they suggest should be added to our vocabulary, which is defined as “praying on-site with insight.”⁸² Each aspect of this definition is important. Prayerwalking is a practice of focused prayer. The team that is prayer

⁷⁹ Paul Covert has also self-published a helpful book on creating and leading a prayer ministry within the context of a church. There is guidance for initial steps of a ministry, leveraging special events to create momentum, model prayers, stumbling and an especially helpful chapter on spiritual warfare prayer. Paul Covert, *Threshold: Transformational Prayer Leadership* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

⁸⁰ Steve Hawthorne and Graham Kendrick, *Prayer-Walking: Praying on Site with Insight* (Orlando FL: Creation House, 1993), 22.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 12.

walking is not merely out for a walk. Being in the community and seeing, hearing and smelling the neighborhood helps sensitize us to what is happening in the community. “On-site praying is simply praying in the very places where you expect your prayers to be answered.”⁸³ They contend that the experience of being present in the community while praying boosts intercession because it affects the perspective of the person praying. Insight is gained by presence in the community to see what is actually happening, who is around you in the neighborhood but it is also gained through researching the community in which one lives and prays as well. Along the way as a team prays for its community, God’s Spirit may move those praying, in line with Scriptural revelation, with further insight as well.

The authors provide not only basic introductory suggestions but also specific agendas and strategies for whole-city prayerwalking.⁸⁴ They provide some theological framework for this discipline by examining the lives of Abraham, Joshua and Jesus. They insightfully note that prayer walking involves three dynamics: worship, warfare and welcome. Worship proclaims the excellencies of God along the journey of the walk. The prayer team, of two or three people, praises God discretely in prayer, though they suggest there may be times where more overt worship is appropriate. Spiritual warfare is encountered as people in prayer seek the healing of their neighborhoods and cities. Praying for people against the structures of evil that bind them, challenges entrenched evil. Welcome is expressed through praying blessings upon communities and inviting people in the community to share requests for prayer.

⁸³ Hawthorne, 16.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 148ff.

Central to the agenda of praying for one's community is praying for God's glory and God's kingdom just as Jesus taught us to pray.⁸⁵ They place a strong emphasis on praying in line with Scripture and praying Scripture as well as attending to the leading of the Holy Spirit during the prayerwalking experience. Keeping one's eyes open helps to attend to what the Spirit may be guiding one to pray. The authors give a broad list of possible places to pray from places of tragedy (e.g. a tragic accident) to places of ongoing sin (e.g. such as a sex shop). "Treat places of sin as choice sites for repentance rather than for pompous recrimination...Never fail to pray for the people involved, including those on-location and those elsewhere who may be affected by the sanctioned sin."⁸⁶ Praying for leaders as well as various ethnic and age groups of one's city is encouraged. They also provide initial plans for praying for distant cities by providing plans for cross-cultural prayer journeys.

This book is beyond a manual but it contains everything needed to begin and develop prayerwalking as a prayer practice for an individual, small group or church. I specifically referenced this work in the prayer practices when introducing the group to prayerwalking.⁸⁷

I believe we learn to pray by praying. Further, I believe that when we pray with others, we begin to pattern our prayers after one another. It is in this regard that I will point toward a few books of scripted prayers. Though not strictly "handbooks" on prayer, they provide examples of praying that form the reader who prays these prayers with the authors. The following two books are provided as examples of this sort of beneficial resource.

⁸⁵ Hawthorne, 93.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁸⁷ See Appendix B, pages 184-185.

Stanley Hauerwas's book *Prayers Plainly Spoken* is an example of this sort of helpful book. He introduces these prayers with characteristic thoughtfulness. He notes that his hope is:

...that these prayers reflect what I have learned about what it means to be a Christian. I have had and I continue to have good teachers in prayer. I will be disappointed if those who have read some of my other work do not find some of what I think reflected in these prayers. Theology is the never-finished discipline of learning to speak with, to and about God. Prayer, accordingly, is our most determinative speech. Any theology, therefore, that is finally not about helping us to pray cannot be Christian. In an odd way, then, this book represents the most important testing of my theological work.⁸⁸

However, he notes that one does not need to know his theological position in order to read, pray or benefit from the prayers. "If you need to know what I think to understand these prayers, then they are not prayers worth praying."⁸⁹

A sampling will suffice to provide example of the richness contained and the humility expressed.

Lord Almighty, we say we want to serve you, we say we want to help others less fortunate than ourselves, we say we want justice. But the truth is, we want power and status because we so desperately need to be loved. Free us from our self-fascination and the anxious activity it breeds, so that we might be what we say we want to be—loved by you and thus capable of unselfish service. Amen.⁹⁰

Gracious God humble us through the violence of your love so we are able to know and confess our sins. We want our sins to be interesting, but, God forgive us, they are so ordinary: envy, hatred, meanness, pride, self-centeredness, laziness, boredom, lying, lust, stinginess and so on. You have saved us from "and so on" to be a royal people able to witness to the world that the powers that make us such ordinary sinners have been defeated. So capture our attention with the beauty of your life that the ugliness of sin may be seen as just that—ugly. God, how wonderful it is to be captivated by you. Amen.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Prayers Plainly Spoken* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 15.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁹¹ Ibid., 64.

Bloody Lord, you are just too real. Blood is sticky, repulsive, frightening. We do not want to be stuck with a sacrificial God who bleeds. We want a spiritual faith about spiritual things, things bloodless and abstract. We want sacrificial spirits, not sacrificed bodies. But you have bloodied us with your people Israel and your Son, Jesus. We fear that by being Jesus' people we too might have to bleed. If such is our destiny, we pray that your will, not ours, be done. Amen.⁹²

These prayers offer us insight into how to pray from our hearts radically calling upon God to move in us and transform us from our selfishness to his likeness.

John Baillie authored a devotional book containing morning and evening prayers for thirty-one days (plus two additional for Sundays). I find this particular book fascinating because each prayer occupies the right page of the book. The left page is blank intentionally to allow for one to write down personal reflections, prayer requests and notes. In his preface, Baillie noted that these prayers were for private use not for liturgical use in public worship. He was particularly concerned that his book of prayers not replace an individual's praying. "These prayers are to be regarded as aids; they are not intended to form the whole of the morning's or evening's devotions or to take the place of more individual prayers for oneself and others."⁹³

⁹² Hauerwas, 90.

⁹³ John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* revised by Susanna Wright (New York: Scribner, 2014), ix. Another book of prayers that I have used with benefit is, Horton Davies ed., *The Communion of Saints: Prayers of the Famous* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990). One of the first such books I purchased and by which I have been touched and taught is, Toyozo W. Nakarai, *An Elder's Public Prayers*, 2nd ed. (Hicksville, NY: Exposition, 1979). Another fine book of prayers or perhaps meditations upon the seven last words of Jesus but framed in the language of prayer directed to Jesus himself is *Watch and Pray with Me*. From the meditation on the fourth word, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me," Rahner writes, "If you prayed like this, O Jesus, if You prayed in such an agony, is there any abyss so deep that we cannot call out from it to Your Father? Is there any despair so hopeless that it cannot become a prayer by being encompassed within Your abandonment? Is there any anguish so numbing that it must no longer expect its mute cries to be heard amidst heaven's jubilation?" Karl Rahner, *Watch and Pray with Me* (1966; repr., New York: Crossroad, 2016), 52.

Because of the significant number of books that exist in this vein, it is certainly possible to select books that might appeal to one's own prayer interest or prayer style. It is wise to swim the prayer waters of older saints, those from other ecclesiastical traditions and varying forms of prayer. Doing so stretches our own practice and may introduce forms or vocabulary that may help us in our conversational relationship with God.

Handbooks have proved useful in this study and practice of prayer because they provide proven practical guidance to specific ways of praying. The books of this section also provide insight about a variety of spiritual disciplines and authors that have helped Christians in the practice of prayer for centuries.

Monastic writings

Turning attention from handbooks with their step-by-step approach and more immediately away from scripted prayers with their carefully and thoughtfully crafted words, I turn to the contemplative tradition and more specifically to the insights of monastics. The purpose of the monastic is to step away from the flow and distraction of the world in order to focus one's life on the pursuit of union with God. Typically, monks take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in order to pursue, with devoted attention, the contemplative life. This life is ordered to the pursuit of knowing and loving God with all of one's being.⁹⁴ The following books have provided insight into the life and practice of prayer. They informed the preparation of materials and group discussions by addressing themes of a more mystical nature. Brother

⁹⁴ For further reading see Gilbert Huddleston, "Monasticism" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1911), accessed January 30, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10459a.htm>. See also, Edmund Gurdon, "Contemplative Life" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1908), accessed January 30, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04329a.htm>.

Lawrence conversed with God in each moment of his duties as monk. The prolific Thomas Merton provides many insights into prayer as communion with God through Scripture in solitude and in community. St. John of the Cross addresses the gracious movement of God in withholding feelings of consolation in his discussion about the dark night of the senses and of the soul. These themes continue and deepen the conversation about prayer as they lead us into faith-filled praying in the mundane and into the unknown reaches of darker times.

Brother Lawrence was a lay brother of the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Paris in the 17th century.⁹⁵ His primary tasks in the monastery, where he lived for some 50 years, included kitchen duty and, when he could no longer manage those duties due to physical limitations, sandal making.⁹⁶ The extent of his writings is not vast. The slim book I have is just under one hundred pages and contains four brief sections: one set of four conversations, several letters, a section of spiritual maxims and a brief discussion of his life published shortly after his death by his friend, Joseph de Beaufort.⁹⁷

Throughout his writings we find his daily practice of attending to God's presence in the midst of his daily duties. He notes, "When we are willing to accept God's help and guard our souls according to his desires, we may commune with Him whenever we like."⁹⁸ In the second

⁹⁵ "Brother Lawrence: Practitioner of God's Presence" *Christianity Today*, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/innertravelers/brother-lawrence.html>.

⁹⁶ Carmen Acevedo Butcher, "The Limping, Unceasingly Praying Brother Lawrence" *Christianity Today*, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2009/september/limping-unceasingly-praying-brother-lawrence.html>.

⁹⁷ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), 75.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

conversation, is testimony about Lawrence's growth in prayer. "In the beginning, Brother Lawrence declared that a little effort was needed to form the habit of continuously conversing with God, telling him everything that was happening. But after a little careful practice, God's love refreshed him, and it all became quite easy."⁹⁹ He noted the importance of finally renouncing whatever does not lead to God. God must be given full control before any work can be done in the soul.¹⁰⁰ "This would allow us to become involved in a continuous conversation with him in a simple and unhindered manner."¹⁰¹

This continuous conversation enables us to do everything with reference to the love of God. Everything that we do should be for the goal of pleasing and loving him. "Out of love, I try not to say, do, or think anything that might offend Him. My only request is that He do whatever He pleases with me."¹⁰² This orientation of the heart constantly focused on the presence of God enabled Brother Lawrence to do his work with great joy so that he didn't feel the great need for retreat to grow in love for God. "He was in no hurry to go on retreats, because he found the same God to love and adore in his ordinary work as in the depth of the desert."¹⁰³

This orientation of heart did not come quickly upon him. He struggled through challenging years.

...as Brother Lawrence attempted to move into a more spiritual life, memories of the sins of his past life engulfed him, and he judged himself a great sinner, unworthy of any of God's attentions. This led to ten years of intense fear and anxiety in which he often

⁹⁹ Lawrence, 11.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰² Ibid., 37.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 90.

doubted his salvation. With an afflicted heart he would pour out his troubles to God. But his own fears of what it would cost to serve God completely caused him to resist God's total salvation. ... In this bitter, dark time, Brother Lawrence found little comfort in prayer, but he continued to pray, nevertheless.¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, he received a revelation of God's majesty which alleviated his fears and ended his struggles. God's loving presence eventually became "so natural to him that he passed the last forty years of his life in continuous practice of the presence of God, which he described as a quiet, familiar conversation with Him."¹⁰⁵ This description of Lawrence's relationship with God as a conversation is very much consonant with authors described previously in this chapter such as Dallas Willard. The lessons learned from Brother Lawrence regarding a constant, faithful turning of our heart's attention to God and finding in daily life the opportunities to experience God's loving presence provide important insight into prayer. These insights were behind comments I made during group sessions regarding God's presence and constant availability for conversation.

Perhaps the most famous monk of the twentieth century is Thomas Merton. Merton arrived at the Abbey of Gethsemani December 10, 1941. He spent the rest of his life as a Cistercian monk there. Beyond his famous autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which has sold over one million copies, "He wrote over sixty other books and hundreds of poems and articles on topics ranging from monastic spirituality to civil rights, nonviolence and the nuclear arms race."¹⁰⁶ I have dabbled in only a few of his numerous writings and seek to share some insights here briefly.

¹⁰⁴ Lawrence, 79.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁶ "Thomas Merton's Life and Work," The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, accessed January 31, 2020, <http://merton.org/chrono.aspx#links>.

Recalling, from above, that the purpose of the monastic life is to focus one's life on the pursuit of and union with God, at that Merton's discussions of prayer, meditation, contemplation and solitude are clearly aimed. He begins the introduction of his book, *Contemplative Prayer*, with these words,

The monk is a Christian who has responded to a special call from God, and has withdrawn from the more active concerns of a worldly life, in order to devote himself completely to repentance, "conversion," *metanoia*, renunciation and prayer. In positive terms, we must understand the monastic life above all as a life of prayer. The negative elements, solitude, fasting, obedience, penance, renunciation of property and of ambition, are all intended to clear the way so that prayer, meditation and contemplation may fill the space created by the abandonment of other concerns.¹⁰⁷

He goes on to explain that what he writes in these pages is primarily for monks but that it should also be of interest to any Christian since every Christian is in some sense a person of prayer. This singular focus might lead those of us not given to such an orientation of life to conclude that monastics have a special understanding or are more expert in prayer than we who carry the concerns of daily life in the world. However, while Merton acknowledges the unique benefits of the monastic life providing space for devotion to prayer, he admits what we all must admit. "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!"¹⁰⁸ This humble admission is one reason why Merton's writings are such an ongoing benefit to all who wish to draw close to God.

Merton is careful to note that the monk's life of prayer is not done in solitary but rather is embedded in communal life and communal prayer. His own context in the Abbey of Gethsemani provided a classic monastic structure of solitude and community. However, he notes that the

¹⁰⁷ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

monastic renewal at the time of his writing (1969) could tend toward the charismatic and away from the institutional perhaps even less communal. In that context, he notes that,

...it must be admitted that communal structures have a value that must not be underestimated. The order, the quiet, the fraternal communication and love provided by a working and praying community are the obvious and ordinary place in which the life of prayer develops.¹⁰⁹

The prayer life of the individual and community is also guided by the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms as well as liturgical celebration.¹¹⁰

These insights are of particular importance to the approach I designed in our group experience. I sought to encourage group members to explore prayer practices as individuals but also within the context of prayer partners and to share their experiences with our group as a whole during our sessions together.¹¹¹ I sought to expose group members to praying the Psalms and other Scriptural prayers as part of their practices and we opened every group session with the reading of a Psalm allowing it to guide our opening prayer for that session. Though I did not quote extensively from Merton in the workbook materials, and not at all in the prayer practice materials, this approach of prayer being practiced by individuals who are faithfully connected to a community of other “beginners” flowed from this encouragement from Merton in particular and monastic life in general.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 28.

¹¹⁰ Another treatment of Contemplative prayer, though not written by a monastic, is from Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986).

¹¹¹ For a helpful article regarding the importance for safe contexts in which to share one’s heart, see Janet Ruffing, “Opening One’s Heart to Another: The Rediscovery of Spiritual Direction,” *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 6-12.

¹¹² In the workbook materials, I did reference: Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2014). I did not quote from or refer, in the materials at all, to

Another of Merton's books from which I quoted minimally in the materials but from which, once again, there is much to glean and much that provided foundations for comments made during group sessions is his *Thoughts in Solitude*.¹¹³ He states,

There is no such thing as a prayer in which “nothing is done” or “nothing happens,” although there may well be a prayer in which nothing is perceived or felt or thought. . . . All real interior prayer, no matter how simple it may be, requires the conversion of our whole self to God, and until this has been achieved—either actively by our own efforts or passively by the action of the Holy Spirit—we do not enter into “contemplation” and we cannot safely relax our efforts to establish contact with God.¹¹⁴

While we must recognize the partnership between our efforts and the work of the Holy Spirit in the conversational relationship with God, I find this reminder—that there is no such thing as a prayer in which nothing happens—to be very encouraging and a helpful reminder for those of us who are, at times, discouraged when we don't “see” God's response to our prayers or “feel” God's presence in prayer.

One final Merton book from which I did not quote at all in any of the materials but to which I referred during our sessions was his *New Seeds of Contemplation*.¹¹⁵ I referred to it when sharing a story about an experience I had at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The story I shared was regarding a time of contemplation I had in the front yard at the monastery while on retreat. There

Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1960). However, there is much to glean from this work as a leader of a group, from the section discussing spiritual direction, and insight regarding prayer. I especially appreciate his insight regarding the importance of leisure in prayer. He states, “In trying to turn out too much work for God we may well end up by doing nothing for Him at all and losing our interior life at the same time. St. Therese of Lisieux wisely reminds us that ‘God has no need of our works: He has need of our love.’” Merton, *Spiritual Direction*, 86.

¹¹³ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Noonday, 1958), 49.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

was a rabbit nearby and I was enthralled, as it twitched its nose smelling the yard and moved its ears being alert for predators, with the manner in which it was perfectly created to accomplish what it was designed to do. I praised God for the rabbit and how I too was perfectly designed to give God glory as well. This connects with the writing of Merton in his thoughts about a tree. “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It ‘consents,’ so to speak, to His creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree.”¹¹⁶

There are many more insights or “seeds” of thought throughout this work and throughout Merton’s writings. I sought to bring to bear this one thought about how each group member was uniquely designed to bring God glory by being exactly what each one was created to be. This affirmation and reminder seemed encouraging to the group.¹¹⁷

Inevitably in the life of prayer, there will be times when, either through tragic events or through times of spiritual drought, we feel no connection with God. We experience silence from God and darkness in our relationship with him. We experience some sort of dark night of our souls. This may arise because of tragic illness like cancer or it may be the result of what might be called growing pains. John of the Cross was a 16th century mystical theologian and monk who

¹¹⁶ Merton, *New Seeds*, 29.

¹¹⁷ Another book filled with brief meditations beneficial for consideration is Thomas à Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ* (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1982). The previously mentioned *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* is another resource for meditations. Anthony Mottola, trans., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (New York: Image Books, 1989). I recognize in this treatment of monastic writings I have left out many other beneficial works such as: St. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, transl. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1964).

had a hand in, along with St. Teresa of Avila, founding the Discalced Carmelites.¹¹⁸ In his writings about “The Dark Night of the Soul,” John saw it as part of the journey toward union with God. He understood such union could not happen without the purgation of sins and dispositions that were contrary to the presence of God. The dark night is a “purgative contemplation” which accomplishes, though passively, the negation of self and all things that prevent the purification of the soul.¹¹⁹ While the purpose of this study and the group sessions was not to pursue the sort of mystical union about which John wrote and for which he strove, there are beneficial insights we learn from him about prayer.¹²⁰

John’s reflections about the dark night are framed in commentary that he offers on a poem he wrote called “The Dark Night.”¹²¹ “One dark night / Fired with love’s urgent longings / --Ah, the sheer grace!-- / I went out unseen, / My house being now all stilled.”¹²² Initially, John notes that the dark night arises when God seeks to move a soul from being a beginner at meditation to being a proficient contemplative so that they might move on to the state of

¹¹⁸ Benedict Zimmerman, “St. John of the Cross,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 8 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08480a.htm> (accessed February 5, 2020).

¹¹⁹ Kieran Kavanaugh ed., *John of the Cross: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 162.

¹²⁰ Calvin Miller comments on the importance of the mystical. He suggests, “In the mystical is reality of life. When the mystery is gone, so is the church—at least the vitality of the church. I believe we are now in just such an advanced stage of spiritual decline. Unless we figure out how to get mystery back in the church, her vitality will continue to wane. We have how-to’ed as long as we can. We must put the inscrutable wind and fire back in our communion.” Miller, 121.

¹²¹ Kavanaugh, 157.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 162.

perfection or divine union of the soul with God.¹²³ This language is strange to our ears, unless we've been reading a lot of mystical theology. However, for our purposes, it is sufficient to recognize that John is describing a growth process. He is charting out the ways that he perceives God works with the soul to help that person mature in relational connection with himself. The various ways that John talks about the passive nature of this purgation, eliminating imperfections, in order for God to dwell in the soul are not of immediate concern for this study. Instead, understanding that a person grows spiritually from immaturity to maturity, from infancy to adulthood is useful for our purposes.

In this regard, there is a very helpful illustration that John provides with regard to a mother nursing its child and then seeking to enable it to grow to stand on its own.

It should be known, then, that God nurtures and caresses the soul, after it has been resolutely converted to His service, like a loving mother who warms her child with the heat of her bosom, nurses it with good milk and tender food, and carries and caresses it in her arms. But as the child grows older, the mother withholds her caresses and hides her tender love; she rubs bitter aloes on her sweet breast and sets the child down from her arms, letting it walk on its own feet so that it may put aside the habits of childhood and grow accustomed to greater and more important things.¹²⁴

John suggests that the grace of God acts like the mother providing encouragements, nurture and satisfaction in spiritual exercises. John goes on to describe how the soul, while enthusiastically pursuing time with God in meditation and prayer, does so without much effort and does so to feel God's nearness and consolations. However, such smooth sailing is not all there is to one's growth in relationship with God. In fact, such smooth sailing, such encouraging feelings, such consolations may become the focus of one's prayer life.

¹²³ Kavanaugh, 163.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 163-164.

At some point we must ask ourselves whether we pray because we want God or whether we merely want the feelings of God's presence. Do we spend time with God for God or for ourselves? Do we just want the "buzz" of God's presence or will we be present with and to God in spite of how we feel? Such questions give rise to what John might call the dark night of the senses when God withholds the consolations that were present early in one's relationship with him to test and refine the person. Will we continue with God even when we don't feel like he is around? Will we believe that he is good even when we don't receive the sorts of responses we want or any response at all? Will we grow up in our conversational relationship with him?

God seeks to move the soul to maturity by weening it from the feelings which may become a crutch or even a source of pride. John notes that the dark night serves to expunge such vices as pride, avarice, lust, anger, spiritual gluttony, envy and sloth.¹²⁵ John asserts, "No matter how much individuals do through their own efforts, they cannot actively purify themselves enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love."¹²⁶ Instead God withdraws sensory delight and withholds pleasure from the soul in order to purge it from these sins.

This is a really important insight into the movement of God in our lives. It may be that the silence that we sometimes experience is actually a grace from God moving us to deeper levels of relationship and maturity. God may be providing us with opportunities to exercise faith that we would not have apart from the challenges of silence. John's advice during such times are

¹²⁵ These vices are the same identified by Thomas Aquinas. See Arthur Charles O'Neil, "Sin," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912), accessed February 5, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14004b.htm>.

¹²⁶ Kavanaugh, 169.

to “remain in rest and quietude” even though that may feel like a waste of time.¹²⁷ Remaining faithful in prayer through the experience will result in deepened maturity on the other side of the silence.

John also identifies another night that he calls “the night of spirit.”¹²⁸ He admits that the first dark night of the senses should probably be called a “reformation and bridling of the appetite rather than a purgation.”¹²⁹ The dark night of the spirit is a deeper purifying of the soul that is more intense and painful.

This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul that purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology. Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens.¹³⁰

In this context he illustrates the purgative effect of this night as being the “same effect on a soul that fire has on a log of wood. The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire.”¹³¹ The divine fire or light of God has such a purifying and transforming effect on the soul which ultimately results in the mystical union of the soul with God.

Typically, the sort of “darkness” that most people think about, experience and are willing to talk about are the dark times that they face when something tragic happens unexpectedly.

¹²⁷ Kavanaugh, 185.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, and 198ff.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

These sorts of experiences are not necessarily the primary sorts of things that John is referring to when he is seeking to explain the dark night of the senses or the spirit to contemplatives.

However, he does admit that hardships are indeed part of the way in which God may work in the soul.

Softened and humbled by aridities and hardships and by other temptations and trials in which God exercises the soul in the course of this night, individuals become meek toward God and themselves and also toward their neighbor. As a result, they will no longer become impatiently angry with themselves and their faults or with their neighbor's faults. Neither are they displeased or disrespectfully querulous with God for not making them perfect quickly.¹³²

Such growth is something, surely, we all want. We don't want to experience the pain of hardships but we recognize that as we walk through the difficult times with God, he brings us through the other side with a deepened appreciation for life, others and him.¹³³

These monastic writings have much to teach us. They were of benefit to me in forming my own comments during our discussion times. Brother Lawrence's challenge to be in conversation with God daily in every aspect of work and leisure was something that I sought to bring out in various discussions throughout the ten weeks of our study. I encouraged group

¹³² Kavanaugh, 195.

¹³³ Though the following books are not monastic in origin, they deal, in varying degrees, with the challenges of dark times and are worth noting for further reading. Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018). John S. Dickerson, *I am Strong: Finding God's Peace and Strength in Life's Darkest Moments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016). John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). I copied Ortberg's chapter 16 "Dark Night of the Soul" and handed that out to the group members as an introduction to this phrase and concept. There are many others. See also a brief but helpful article regarding the benefit of reading the mystics for personal growth, Heather Parkinson-Webb, "Reading the Mystics as Spiritual Formation," *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* 6, no. 1 (Spring / Summer 2008): 56-59. A distinction between redemptive and destructive suffering is made by Kim V. Engelmann, "Discernment for Suffering: Hamster Wheel or Potter's Wheel?" *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* 6, no. 2 (Fall / Winter 2008): 20-25.

participants to think about prayer as that sort of ongoing conversation. Merton's insights regarding the importance of community in prayer reinforced Onwuchekwa's insights noted earlier in this chapter. The rhythms of the monastic experience itself encouraged me to seek to develop a rhythm for the group that involved both individual prayer and solitude experiences as well as communal prayer, discussion and prayer partner practices. The Psalm reading and prayer with which we opened each session even reflected a monastic communal experience of Scripture and prayer. Merton's contemplative insights were also part of the stories I shared from my own experiences at Gethsemani. John of the Cross provides deeper insights into what may be behind the arid and dark times that each of us experience in relationship with God. While the difficulties we identify as dark experiences are not the sole focus of John's interest, they do play a part and understanding these experiences from John's perspective, help us to begin to view these experiences with a wider-angle lens. While I did not bring much content from these monastic writings directly over to workbook materials or prayer practices, they were very important for my own nurture, reflection and specifically for my own input during our discussions.

Throughout this chapter, I have conversed with several authors with whom I have dialogued for the preparation and conducting of the study and practice of prayer with group members from FCCC. It has been challenging selecting what to write about and what to leave unstated. I am grateful for the ways in which the general introduction books provided different definitions of prayer and content about which to reflect in the workbook materials and prayer practices. I am especially grateful for Thurston's call to attend to God and Smith's close union of prayer with the kingdom purposes of God. The importance of the ongoing conversation with God that prayer is, noted by Willard, Brother Lawrence and others, was central to the way in which I sought to encourage people to understand prayer as a conversation in which we speak with and

listen to God. Mulholland's reminder that we are wired in particular ways that lend toward preferring certain spiritual formation disciplines was crucial in understanding our need for holistic spiritual practices. He teaches us that it is normal to find particular practices comfortable but also admonishes us to stretch ourselves to nourish our shadow sides. This reminder that we are embodied creatures who are called to follow Christ holistically is crucial to our growth in relationship with God. This was vital as I sought to introduce the idea that we experience and relate to God as embodied creatures.

The handbooks provided many engaging and helpful prayer practices. The several helpful practices from the *Zúme Guidebook* such as the prayer cycle, S.O.A.P.S. notes and prayer walking were particularly helpful. Participants found all of these very beneficial. The guidance received for fasting from Calhoun proved another very practical use of the handbook materials.

In conclusion, this literature review showcases the introductory texts, handbooks, and monastic writings that introduced group participants in this study to the perspectives and practices of prayer used in group materials, discussions, and experiences. These books provided definitions of prayer and models for lengthened experiences of prayer. These authors helped guide our conversations with direct insights from their words and guided my own thoughts and input for our discussion times. As noted previously, there are hundreds and thousands of books that could be read on the topic of prayer. There is much yet to read and learn from those of centuries past and of our own time. I am still such a beginner when it comes to prayer. I am grateful to have had this conversation and to continue it.

CHAPTER 2

GROUP PROCESS SUMMARY

As I have stated, prayer is weird. Even defining prayer as a conversation with God certainly doesn't help us much because we're "conversing" with someone whom we cannot touch and whom we neither see nor hear in audible tones. We recognize that Jesus prayed and that as his followers we too should pray. Yet it doesn't seem that we naturally experience the same vital sort of connection with the Father that Jesus did. That's why it takes practice. This practice is best encouraged (or done?) in the company of others. We are wired for community and we can find encouragement for our individual pilgrimages of prayer in the fellowship of others. Praying together in community, however, is also vital to our growth. Therefore, this chapter will discuss the approach I took with the focus group for this project. Having discussed the conversation held with several authors that provided much content and practice for this study, I now turn our attention to a summary of the material used for the conversation with one another.

The Study and Practice of Prayer group, with which I met for ten weeks for the purpose of this project, engaged in discussions of prepared session materials, prayer practices and times of prayer with prayer partners. This is a description of the group schedule, group session materials and the thought process behind the creation of these materials. Approaches to each group session and the practices that were encouraged are also described.

People learn in various ways. Recognizing this, the approach of this group exploration of prayer involved discussion, reading, individual and group practice to enable participants to experience and assess what might be most beneficial to them in developing as people of prayer. I prepared session material which I handed out week by week to be read for discussion at the next

group gathering. I also prepared “Prayer Practices” which provided the opportunity for the participants to explore particular practices during the week. Participants’ experiences were shared and discussed during group sessions as well. Prayer partners were assigned in order to help people learn to pray with others, to remind participants that prayer is not their own individual possession – they are part of a praying community, and to allow for opportunities to encourage one another in the various Prayer Practices. A chart of the group sessions and prayer practices is provided to get an overview of the ten-week experience.

Table 1. Session Schedule

Week	Date	Group session discussion topic	Prayer Practice handout (in session)	Prayer Partner verbal instruction
1	8/28/19	Introductory session	None given this week	Partners assigned get acquainted
2	9/4/19	What is prayer & the person of God	Lectio Divina & examples	Connect, pray together for 5 min
3	9/11/19	Faith and initial steps of prayer: communicating with the unseen One	S.O.A.P.S.	Check in re. prayer practices & pray together for 10 min.
4	9/18/19	Prayer models: benefits & challenges	Journaling & Acronym prayer	Pray a Psalm together and pray for 15 min.
5	9/25/19	Solitude, fasting and prayer	Fasting, Jesus Prayer & Breath Prayer	Encourage re. practices and pray for 20 min.
6	10/2/19	Embodied praying	Zúme Prayer Cycle	Pray for 30 min. together
7	10/9/19	Does he want to hear it? What do we take to God?	Praying Scripture from Thrasher Appendix 1	Pray for 40 min. together
8	10/16/19	Intercession & missional praying	Prayer walking	Pray for 50 min together
9	10/23/19	Praying in the darkness	No additional but did provide Prayer plan material	Pray the Zúme Prayer Cycle together
10	10/30/19	Closing group assessment, Prayer Practices Plan & celebration	None given	None given

SESSION FLOW

Each session followed an outline provided below in Appendix C, “session notes,” which includes the overall objectives for each session. We opened each night with the reading of a Psalm and prayer that flowed from the Psalm read. In varying order, there was typically discussion about three primary elements: the material for the session topic, a conversation about the prayer practice which group members had practiced during the week leading up to that session (including a brief introduction to the prayer practice that was handed out that night to be practiced prior to the next session), and the group member’s prayer partner experience.¹³⁴

GROUP MEMBER MATERIALS

The following is a description, in summary fashion, of the material provided to each group member; both workbook materials for the session discussion topic as well as prayer practices given to the participants. I will discuss the materials in accord with the above schedule.

The introductory material of session one encouraged people to understand prayer not only as a spiritual discipline but also as the foundation for a conversational relationship with God, a phrase borrowed from a book by Dallas Willard.¹³⁵ This session also encouraged participants to consider the connection between prayer and Jesus’ teaching and practice of the reign of God. Prayer is a way of seeking God’s reign, in contemporary life, for oneself and for all creation. Jesus’ experience of the immanence of God’s reign is something that believers also experience

¹³⁴ Exceptions to this pattern would include session 1, 2 and 10 for which there was no handed out prayer practice material.

¹³⁵ Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

and extend through the ongoing development of the conversational relationship with God in prayer.

One of my primary concerns with this initial material was to begin to point toward what would be made more explicit in the second session material. Jesus' teaching and manner of life expressed the present reality of the kingdom of God. Our practice of prayer provides a communion pathway by which we live under the reign of God and by which God's good purposes are extended in the world.

The second session material provides a foundation for why we pray. Our prayer lives are reflections of Jesus' own life of prayer. Jesus leaned in toward God from the beginning to the end of his ministry. If we are Jesus' disciples, we too follow not only Jesus' teaching but his manner of life.

I sought to encourage the group by acknowledging that prayer is also weird. While we know that we should pray, because Jesus taught and practiced prayer, we find it a bit strange because of the nature of speaking with someone whom we can neither see nor hear. However, communication is absolutely necessary to the formation and growth of relationships. The same is true with God and, therefore, it is necessary for us to grow in the spiritual discipline of prayer.

The minute we talk about the importance of spiritual disciplines, it is possible to begin to conceive of them as the thing that is important and reduce them to a checklist of things to be done to be "good" disciples. I prayed. Check. Therefore, it is necessary to realize that the point of praying is not praying but rather to grow in conversational relationship with God. I referred again to Dallas Willard to emphasize this point.

The aim and substance of spiritual life is not fasting, prayer, hymn singing, frugal living, and so forth. Rather, it is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence where we are placed. The spiritually advanced person is not the one who engages in lots and lots of disciplines, any

more than the good child is the one who receives lots and lots of instruction or punishment.¹³⁶

To say that the spiritually advanced person is not one who engages in lots of spiritual disciplines seems counter intuitive but it is, in fact, an important insight into understanding the point of prayer and other disciplines.

This brings us to the point of acknowledging that communication is a challenge and that we are beginners in the practice and the best place to begin is to begin with God himself. I asked the group to consider the way in which they picture God. The way we picture God has a significant impact on the way we feel about him and believe he might feel about us. Therefore, we turned to Scripture to consider the character of God, what he is like, what turns God away from relationship and what we see of God in Jesus.

During the conversation of this session's material, there were questions about what to do with a wandering mind during prayer. We discussed the challenges of noise and distractions including a racing, consumed mind. I suggested, what had been shared with me once by a spiritual director, that we bring the topics of those "wanderings" to God as part of our prayer.

My goal in having the group search the Scriptures to consider what God is like had two purposes. First, I hoped that the Scriptures would help shape the image of God that group members had in their minds. If any of them held images that were inconsistent with Scripture, I hoped those would begin to be challenged by the Scriptures. A second purpose was that the group would understand, early in our group times together, that having a conversational

¹³⁶ Willard, *Hearing God*, 138.

relationship with God involves hearing God communicating with us primarily through the Scriptures.¹³⁷

This leads us to the first prayer practice that I handed out during this session for the group to practice during the week leading up to the next session: Lectio Divina.¹³⁸ The point of introducing the Lectio Divina prayer practice was to help participants slow down their Bible reading and listen for God through the Scriptures. I believe that most Christians tend to approach Scripture too much like a text book from which we seek to extract knowledge or information. Slowing down our reading of Scripture and asking the specific Lectio questions of the text help us discern God's voice through Scripture to us.

I believed that this practice would be something new for most of the group members. I was correct. The majority had neither heard of nor practiced Lectio Divina before this experience. The responses were very positive and encouraging.¹³⁹

The third session began with a Psalm and prayer followed by a discussion of their experience with Lectio. We then discussed the session three material centering on the role of

¹³⁷ I did not suggest that God's communication with us is *exclusively* through Scripture but that his *primary* method of reliable communication comes through the Scriptures. I believe that Jesus followers need to dig deep into the Scriptures to understand the mind and heart of God. I am convinced that we should especially be well versed in the Gospels so that we catch the rhythms of Jesus' heart, teaching and lifestyle habits. At the same time, I cautioned group members with Jesus' own admonition regarding the Scriptures found in John 5:39-40, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

¹³⁸ See Appendix B below for the description of Lectio for which I relied primarily on Ruth Barton and Bonnie Thurston. You will also find there one of the two examples of Lectio I provided the group members. The second of the two examples of Lectio that I provided came from the Lectio Divina in English from Catholic.Bible: <https://catholic.bible/lectio-divina-in-english/>.

¹³⁹ See chapter 3 page 88 for a few of the responses to the Lectio experience.

faith in prayer. Prayer is a response to a God who has taken the initiative and made himself known in history. Prayer is an expression of faith that God exists, hears and rewards those who seek him (cf. Hebrews 11:6). There is a re-formation that takes place in us as we pray and, since we cannot change our own hearts, trusting that God is involved and active in the conversation and the process of changing our hearts is vital.

At this point in the material, I sought to address “Word of Faith” teaching in brief in order to distinguish between trusting that God hears and answers and believing that God will bring about our desired ends, if we don’t “ruin the whole prayer system” with doubt.¹⁴⁰ Some may think this an unnecessary, even distracting, turn and inappropriate to the point of this session’s material. However, it seemed appropriate for two reasons. First, part of a sermon series we were going through at the time addressed this teaching and I wanted to affirm the teaching of our lead minister. Second, there are those in the congregation who have an affinity for this sort of approach to God and I believed it important to address it directly.

I sought to point out that faith is important in the practice of prayer but it does not work as a coercive device upon God. The focus of faith is upon God and not upon faith itself as a key to activate positive responses to our requests. Using the lives of Elijah and Abraham, I sought to show that God continued to work through people in challenging and confusing circumstances like these two men experienced in order to bring about his desired ends. There will be times when it might take years before we see responses to our prayers. This requires careful discernment as we seek to hear God’s voice in answer to our prayers prayed believing that he hears us and entrusting ourselves to his care when we can’t hear or see his response.

¹⁴⁰ Kenneth Copeland, *Prayer Your Foundation for Success* (Fort Worth TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1983), 48.

The prayer practice handed out during this session was the S.O.A.P.S. approach to reading Scripture found in the *Zúme Guidebook* on the Zúme Project website.¹⁴¹ The Lectio practice was intended to help the group members slow down and listen for God's voice in the Scripture. This approach includes that step and adds to the "incarnatio" aspect of the Lectio by focusing on obeying what God speaks through the Scriptures. Zúme Training is free on-line training in Disciple Making Movement principles designed to equip disciples to make more disciples. The S.O.A.P.S. Bible Reading format consists of the following:¹⁴²

- **Scripture:** Write out one or more verses than are particularly meaningful to you, today.
- **Observation:** Rewrite those verses or key points in your own words to better understand.
- **Application:** Think about what it means to obey these commands in your own life.
- **Prayer:** Write out a prayer telling God what you've learned and how you plan to obey.
- **Sharing:** Ask God who He wants you to share with about what you've learned / applied.

I appreciate this simple, practical focus on living out the Scripture as guided by the Spirit.

During the fourth session we discussed various models for prayer including A.C.T.S. and the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6. I provided various examples for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication from the book of Psalms. I then offered some thoughts regarding the various phrases of the Lord's Prayer and how that prayer might function as a model prayer for us now.¹⁴³

After discussing model prayers, I suggested some benefits and challenges they provide. One benefit is that model prayers provide an organization schema for prayer that ensures that we

¹⁴¹ The unpublished *Zúme Guidebook* is stored at: https://storage.googleapis.com/zume-file-mirror/en/33_en_zume_guidebook.pdf.

¹⁴² *Zúme Guidebook*, 4.

¹⁴³ I shared various acronym models for prayer. One I did not share but find encouraging is described by Larry Crabb, "The PAPA Prayer," *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 24-27.

are doing more than merely presenting a list of requests to God. Another is that Biblical prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer, provide language beyond what we might normally use. They teach us to pray beyond the boundaries of our own imagination and experience using language beyond our usual vocabulary.¹⁴⁴ Further, Biblical prayers, in particular, provide us ways of praying our emotions that we may even feel are inappropriate.¹⁴⁵

These prayers are not immune from challenges. While such prayer models provide us with structure for our prayers, it is possible for them to become stifling or formulaic making the pray-er feel that each prayer must contain all the elements of the pattern in order for the prayer to be "complete" or a "real" prayer. Further challenges include the possibility that Biblical prayers (or prayers written by others) may be "said" rather than "prayed" by the person using these prayers. Praying Biblical prayers, I suggest, requires perhaps an extra effort of concentration and attention so that the words, composed by someone else, express, with meaning, the heart-conviction of the one praying them. Such prayers can stretch us beyond our capacity if we are doing more than reading someone else's words. No doubt we have experienced the difference between *reciting* the Lord's Prayer and *praying* the Lord's Prayer.

During this session's discussion, I felt the need to mention that it's really important, as we experience our minds wander during prayer, that we be gentle with ourselves in the context of prayer. When we find the need to bring our attention back to God, we should do so gently and not violently. Rather than getting down on ourselves or condemning ourselves for a wandering mind, we may simply thank God for recalling us to attend to him and our conversation.

¹⁴⁴ This is also true for printed prayers of others.

¹⁴⁵ This is demonstrated more clearly in the discussion regarding praying the Psalms in a later session.

I also noted that it's important to begin to open ourselves to listen to the Spirit during prayer. As we are seeking to develop a conversational relationship with God, we need to remember that God is interacting with us and speaking too. We need to be aware of this and begin the practice of quieting ourselves in prayer to hear his voice.¹⁴⁶

In addition to utilizing a model prayer (like A.C.T.S. or the Lord's Prayer) as a prayer practice, I provided a handout on journaling which we discussed briefly before concluding our time together in prayer. My goal in providing the participants with exercises like the Lectio, S.O.A.P.S and journaling was, again, to help them slow down and listen for the voice of God through the Scriptures he has inspired. I trust such interaction will lead to life change. As noted, I surmised that this would be new for several of the participants. It was.

We closed this session by gathering around one of our group members who was to have a CT scan of a nodule in her neck during the coming week. She was very nervous and so we spent some time praying for her by putting a chair for her in the center of our circle of group members. We put our hands on her or one another and prayed for her. This spontaneous time of prayer was encouraging for her but also was referenced as very meaningful, by another group member, during the closing group feedback time.

Having discussed ways of slowing down to listen for the Lord during prayer, we discussed, during the fifth session, the ways which solitude, silence, and fasting contribute to

¹⁴⁶ Further, I began to encourage the consideration that it's possible to be present with God and enjoy his presence without speaking words at all. Miller observes, "Those whose prayers are unending monologues make themselves a giant mouth while making God a small ear. The best prayers are dialogues of rapport. Presence is being 'with God.' It is neither talking nor listening. It is abiding in the presence of God. Rapport treasures oneness so much it will not make of prayer two modes—one of talking and one of listening. Lovers may sit on a long strand of beach so mesmerized by surf and sky that any speech would trivialize their togetherness, not enhance it. Rapport is conversation too. Silent togetherness is better conversation than chatty concord." Miller, 110.

prayer. I encouraged group members to recognize that the busy nature of our lives, the amount of information at our finger tips and the ubiquitous nature of technology all contribute to the “noise” we experience in our culture. The distraction that is created by all this noise makes it difficult to be alone and to be quiet.

Being constantly on the move, managing the busy calendar filled with activity, makes it difficult to know who we are apart from the busy-ness. Our being becomes consumed, overwhelmed with doing and thus our identity itself revolves more around our activities. Being still, alone in the presence of God, without doing something becomes difficult. Being quiet and concentrating on God is challenged by a mind racing through to-do lists. This challenge of quieting ourselves is a significant barrier to a life of prayer. This is where the first two of the three topics of this session come in; solitude and silence.

Turning off the noise and getting away from the clutter confronts us with the reality of our own souls. There is nothing to hide behind, nothing to *do* to distract us from the cry of our souls for healing and health, nurture and nourishment. Using encouragement from Ruth Barton, Dallas Willard, Richard Foster and others I sought to make the group aware of the importance of these practices and point toward some practical steps toward them as they seek to grow in the practice of prayer.¹⁴⁷ The need for solitude is affirmed by the example and words of Jesus. Jesus sought out solitude himself and he sought to get the disciples away from the hectic nature of ministry to get some rest (Mark 6:31-32). The call to practice solitude and silence is about making ourselves available, to attune ourselves to God’s presence in order to hear Him. It is not

¹⁴⁷ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*. Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. Foster, *Celebration*.

primarily about creating space to catch up on some needed sleep. Still Jesus bids the weary to receive rest from him (Matthew 11:28).¹⁴⁸

Fasting follows the discussion of solitude and silence. I suggest that both solitude and silence were a form of fasting themselves; from clutter and noise that fills our lives. We then turn our attention to a brief examination of the use of fasting in Scripture by Jesus, Daniel and others in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Finally, I offer some practical guidelines for fasting suggested by Adele Calhoun.¹⁴⁹

The prayer practices that I asked the group members to practice the week leading up to our next session included fasting, the Jesus Prayer and breath prayer. The fasting practice was to be guided by the session content. It was not elaborated on further through an additional handout. The Jesus Prayer and Breath Prayer were described in the prayer practice handout given during this session. For that discussion, I relied heavily on Bonnie Thurston.¹⁵⁰

It was during this session that I also shared a story about my experience during a retreat at Gethsemani. It highlights the important role of silence and time with Jesus. It does not appear in the session materials in the workbook as I shared it verbally. Therefore, I will share a form of it here.

While on retreat at Gethsemani (yes, they spell it that way) monastery West of Lexington, KY, I was fascinated by an invitation given by the “Guest Master,” Fr. Damien. He invited the retreatants to take part in an “Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.” He said that both Catholics and Protestants were welcome.

¹⁴⁸ During a retreat at Gethsemani, I spoke with Fr. Matthew Kelty, the monk serving as the Guest Chaplain, about my disappointment caused by constantly falling asleep while trying to read and pray. He reminded me of the hectic context from which I came in the world of ministry. He stated that I shouldn’t feel bad or that I had “made” a bad retreat by sleeping a lot. He encouraged me, “Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is sleep.”

¹⁴⁹ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.

¹⁵⁰ Thurston, *For God Alone*.

When he made the invitation, he stated that they didn't do anything but pray for an hour. He also stated, "If you want to get to know Jesus, you have to spend time with him, you know?"

I went to the chapel and got there early (around 4:05 p.m.). However, I thought I had arrived late because when I arrived, there were already people there. Sitting. In silence. I waited. I read Scripture. When Fr. Damien arrived, around 4:20, he put on a stole, unlocked and opened a box on the wall, and removed a small, lovely jar/bottle sort of thing. This ornate container he placed on the altar and then took a seat. He said nothing. There were about 15 of us there together. A few people read silently, some watched silently, others prayed silently. Everyone sat in silence. (It looked as if Fr. Damien may have fallen asleep a time or two—but if he did so, he did so in silence.)

At around 5:20 another of the monks came in and sat next to me. I thought that it was potentially going to be a bit embarrassing to break the silence in order to explain to him—older as he was with a hearing aid and cane—that he should go up past me when it came time to partake. Since I'm not Catholic, I would not be allowed to receive the Eucharist. Around 5:25 Fr. Damien got up, approached the altar, took the container, made the sign of a cross with the bottle and put it back in the lock box. The "exposition" was over.

I didn't have to explain anything to the old brother monk because no one partook of communion at that time. We just sat with Jesus—we watched and we prayed. I wondered how many of my Protestant brothers and sisters would sit in silence with one another for over an hour receiving nothing more than Jesus' presence. I recalled Jesus' own words in another Gethsemane, "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" (Matthew 26:40) and I thought that three times a week there is a small band of disciples in a chapel at a monastery in Kentucky who are doing just that; silently watching with Jesus for an hour.¹⁵¹

I was somewhat surprised by the encouraging reception several group participants expressed to this story. Such experiences are rare in my own experience and it seems that I am not the only one who hungers for them.

The material for session six discusses the fact of Jesus' incarnation and the ramifications for us as embodied creatures. That Jesus was embodied (and I mildly argue that he still experiences life as embodied) provides us with an example of how embodied humans ought to pray and relate to God. I suggest that we pray as embodied creatures and our bodies actually matter when it comes to prayer. Our bodies are not just part of us, they are us, an integral part of

¹⁵¹ This is adapted from a blog I wrote about this experience on August 29, 2010. It may be found at <https://reachoutoncampus.com/2010/08/29/time-with-jesus/>.

who we are. What our bodies do matters eternally and we relate to Jesus as embodied beings. We don't have to leave our bodies behind and become disembodied in order to commune with our heavenly Father. We can relate to God as embodied beings because he relates to us in this way – by becoming flesh. This leads to several realizations.

First, our bodies are a gift. They are God-formed (Genesis 2:7, 1:31) and, in Christ, God-filled as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We are to honor God with our bodies by caring for them through proper nutrition and exercise, by not using them to take inordinate pleasure in things contrary to God's desired design for us, and by being "attuned" to them.

At this point in the session material I insert a pause to encourage each reader to concentrate on what their body is feeling. I encourage them to breathe deeply, sit with good posture and consciously to relax the various muscles of their body from head to feet. This interlude is an attempt to call attention to what the body was feeling like and how that affects the task of reading and praying.

Another realization that exists as embodied being is that we are "wired" with certain personality or temperament preferences. I relied upon the work of M. Robert Mulholland for this discussion about attending to our personalities when it comes to spiritual practices.¹⁵² Recognizing our preferences enables us to determine when and where we pray. It helps us realize why we might "get more out of" praying alone or in community; both of which are important for all of us.

A final realization that is discussed in the material is the way we use our bodies to pray. Whether we bow or lay prostrate or break into song and dance, weeping or laughing all are

¹⁵² Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*.

prayers done in, through and with our bodies. This is affirmed through several Psalms that I shared in this section.

In closing this session of the material, I comment briefly on comfort and discomfort in prayer suggesting that there may be appropriate times for both. I do caution, however, that the experience of pain or serious discomfort does not make prayer more holy. Then I conclude that our bodies are a gift from our heavenly Father and we can relate best to him as the embodied creatures his hands formed us to be. We do not need to seek to be disembodied spiritual beings who degrade our fleshly state but rather we are embodied spiritual beings fully enjoying the wonder of God's creation and his own union with flesh in Jesus Christ. We learn what it is to be truly human from the God-man, Jesus. May we rejoice in God's very good gift.

The prayer practice handed out during this session was the Zúme Prayer Cycle. This handout provides a guide for an hour-long time of prayer dividing the hour into twelve five-minute segments.¹⁵³ When handing this out, I asked the group to recall the story I shared the previous week about being with Jesus and watching with him for an hour. I reminded them of Fr. Damien's comment, "If you want to get to know Jesus, you have to spend time with him, you know?" I suggested this is one way of doing that.

As noted previously, each session was opened with a Psalm and a prayer. Typically, I selected the Psalm by following a method of reading the Psalms I learned years ago. By noting the date of the session (session 7 was held on 10/9/19), I read through the five Psalms beginning with the ninth Psalm and reading every 30th Psalm after that to determine which Psalm fit the particular day's session material best. One Psalm was typically chosen. For session seven, I

¹⁵³ See the handout in Appendix B, page 178.

selected Psalm 39:1-7 and Psalm 99. These particular Psalms were selected because of the call to have a larger view of life, the world and God's reign.

In this session, I sought to encourage us to discuss whether anything we prayed was "trivial." I began the session material with a brief story about a woman who was on a diet praying for a parking space in front of a donut store. She determined that if the Lord wanted her to have a donut, a parking spot would be available right in front of the store. It so happened that a spot was available in front of the store, on her tenth trip around the block. I ask in the material whether she should have prayed for this and whether God answered it. My hope was to begin to help the group members begin to consider their prayers from someone else's perspective. I asked them to consider this question: What is appropriate to take to God in prayer?

I began here not only because I wanted to encourage the group members to consider another perspective on their prayers but also to enable or to allow them to ask that question out loud. I believe that there are many times that each of us choose not to pray about things because we assume that God doesn't want to hear about the matter.

I follow up the initial story with the story of a friend and his wife who faced the challenges and frustrations of infertility. He shared his anger at God with someone who rebuked my friend for having such feelings. Should he express his anger at God? Was that appropriate? Where do we turn to begin to answer such questions? I turned our attention to the Psalms and the book of Job. We find there, in abundance, inflamed, emotional statements made to God. Through resting in these texts and allowing them to give voice to our hurt and anger we learn important things about ourselves and God.

We learn that we are human. We experience anguish and challenges all the time and that happens because they are part of the human experience. At one point I suggest that life is messy.

It is filled with joys and sorrows. Through these Scriptures, we learn that others have experienced the messiness of life and have brought their laments directly to God.

We also learn that God is a gracious receiver. He is big enough to manage the blunt, sometimes caustic, cries of his hurt kids. We learn that God walks with us through the pain and cares for us through the terrors of our experiences. God hears us in and through all of the storms. The Psalms and Job show us this truth.

The closing two paragraphs of the session material bring together the tragic and the mundane. I ask whether these texts tell us anything about praying for parking spots concluding that they don't. Are such prayers sinful? No. They may be "trivial" but they are likely not sinful. However, we should probably ask ourselves what such prayers suggest about our view of God. Do we view God as a genie whom we seek to provide us with our selfish whims? Or is God the God he has revealed himself to be—Creator, King, Father? In previous sessions, we noted that God delights in us and he delights to commune with us. Isn't the mundane, ordinary, day-to-day life appropriate to bring to God?

The mundane is certainly appropriate to bring to God in as much as we are shaped by God, through prayer, to want what he wants and it is through prayer that we discover God's heart is oriented different than is our own. He will receive us no matter the topic of our prayer and he will take us beyond ourselves to grow us up, conforming us to the image of his Son who did and said what he saw and heard from the Father (John 5:19, 12:49-50) ultimately surrendering to the Father's will (Matthew 26:42).

During this session we also discussed the Zúme material and I handed out the Praying Scripture prayer practice.¹⁵⁴ In that handout, I provide examples of three prayers from Paul (Col. 1:9-12, Eph. 1:17-19a; 3:16-21) and ways they may be utilized to pray for ourselves and for others. It continues to be my conviction that the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray best through the prayers of Scripture. These prayers not only give voice to our emotions in difficulties, as noted above regarding the Psalms and Job, they also open our hearts to “categories” of prayer beyond what we might think. I encouraged the group to adapt various scriptural prayers as part of their practice prior to the next session.

At the close of this session, group members signed up for the second personal interview. Those were held prior to session eight.

During session eight, I encouraged the group members to connect with their prayer partners for coffee or lunch and pray as they wished. I recognized that these partnerships were, on the whole, becoming more challenging to keep up and so did not want the lengthening of prayer times to become an overwhelming burden to them. Following that encouragement, we discussed the experience of praying Scripture. It seemed that this approach to prayer was understood and received well but that a few of the group members seemed to have a challenge putting it into practice. I encouraged their further practice and consideration and then moved on with the group material.

The primary theme of the session eight material is intercession. The material begins with identifying, from Scripture, the various examples and admonitions to pray for others. Jesus, the early church, the Holy Spirit all prayed for others and the Scriptures urge us to do likewise.

¹⁵⁴ I included Appendix 1, “Prayers from Scripture” from Bill Thrasher, *A Journey to Victorious Praying: Finding Discipline and Delight in Your Prayer Life* with Foreword by Erwin W. Lutzer (Chicago: Moody Press, 2003), 241-249.

I noted that praying for others reflects the prayers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the early church. We are encouraged to pray for the sick and for the mission of the gospel to go forward. Just how we do that is something that we are free to explore. I suggested there is help in this regard that is provided by a variety of authors. Gordon Smith, for instance, suggests that “Prayer is an act of service. We serve our neighbor and our world by interceding for the needs of the other.”¹⁵⁵ I also noted several guidelines that Smith provides regarding being careful not to violate the trust those who request prayer give to those interceding for them.

It was during this session that I also encouraged group members to follow the “pray now” rule that we have used as staff members of Fern Creek Christian Church. I urged group members not to be the sort of person who says, “I’ll pray for you” when a request is shared but never does. Rather, I challenged group members to pray immediately upon receiving the request from another.

Rick Richardson is another author to whom I turned for guidance in this ministry of intercession. In his book, *Experiencing Healing Prayer*, Richardson states, “I would ask Jesus how he was praying for the people I cared about.”¹⁵⁶ I noted how this caused me to pause and wonder about how Jesus would have me pray for others. This is worth considering since our initial response to people who ask for prayer is to pray in line with the person’s wish / request. I go on to note some guidelines that Richardson offers for discerning God’s lead in praying for another.

During this session I also shared an experience I had with an “impression” I sensed while praying for a professor of mine during a group prayer time. I did not do as I felt urged to and

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *Teach Us*, 105.

¹⁵⁶ Richardson, 73.

asked the professor about it after the prayer. The advice given by this humble teacher stays with me to this day. When I asked, “How do I know if that’s something from the Lord or is just my own head?” He noted that we don’t know but that we should own such impressions and nudges. He suggested that I could have said something like, “I don’t know whether this is coming from the Lord or if it’s coming from me but I get the sense that I should put my hand on your chest over your heart as we pray for you. Is that o.k.?” I encouraged our group members to seek to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and the promptings they may experience while interceding for others but also to acknowledge that such impressions may not necessarily be from the Spirit. It is appropriate to acknowledge that.

This session material also explored the importance of praying for others to come to know and follow Jesus. I open this portion of the session material with a quote from John Onwuchekwa. He asks,

Where do missionaries come from? Jesus seems to think they come as a result of God responding to our prayers: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2).¹⁵⁷

What Jesus asks us to do, he expects us to pursue.

As I explore this aspect of prayer, I raise a question that has been nagging me for some time. Is it possible that the salvation of the world has not happened in the last 2,000 years because those of us in the church are very busy with many things that have nothing to do with the actual mission of the church? We are busy with Bible studies and church programs and many activities of life but we are not busied in the vital business of seeking and saving lost souls. We are not busy praying for them. We recognize our need for Jesus and we want to draw close to

¹⁵⁷ Onwuchekwa, 116.

Father through Christ but we fail to discern the heartbeat of God for the child that has strayed from the fold. Is it possible that the feeling of disconnection from God we experience sometimes, is because he is out searching for the one lost and we are among the ninety-nine who do not need to repent? Perhaps we should be about the Father's business and we may find that he is with us there in the thick of this great co-mission that Jesus gave his followers.

I close this section with insight from Paul Y. Cho as a challenge to us, as American Christians, to pray, as boldly and tirelessly as have our Korean brothers and sisters, for God to open doors for the gospel to be heard and people to respond to Jesus.

The prayer practice, handed out at the close of this session, provided instruction about prayer walking. I used material from the Zúme Project handbook, from Alex and Hannah Absalom and from Ed Stetzer. Each of these sources provide helpful and practical insight and slightly different approaches to this missional practice.

As supplemental to the session nine material handed out for the following week's session, I included the chapter entitled "Dark Night of the Soul" from John Ortberg's book *Soul Keeping*.¹⁵⁸ This was offered as further preparation for the following week to offer a brief, hopefully accessible introduction to this theme.

Session nine material was difficult to write. Part of the difficulty is due to the topic, "Praying in dark nights – illness & suffering." Part was due to the personal story that I shared regarding the miscarriage of our first child. In sharing the story and the following story about Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, I sought to remind people that these sorts of experiences are "gut" experiences or "heart" experiences rather than experiences about which we

¹⁵⁸ Ortberg, 179-188.

can be logical or rational. I suggest that going through such experiences is not something done with our logical faculties cued up.

The group received the story very graciously and one person expressed thankfulness for the vulnerable nature of the story. Other group members nodded or affirmed their agreement and we shared various times when we had gone through challenging times and what we felt about God. I acknowledge that some themes in this study overlap. When asking about what God may or may not want to hear, as we did in session seven, I was seeking to help our group members ask a question I believed they experienced (does God really want to hear this?). During this session I sought to address head on the darkness of suffering and the effect that has on our lives of prayer.

In looking to Jesus as the man of suffering who is familiar with pain, I suggest that there are things that we can learn about Jesus only by going through difficult times. Through the challenges of miscarrying our first child, I learned that God cared for us even when we couldn't feel him nearby. He was present in spite of my inability to sense him. He is faithful and patient. He allowed me to walk at my own pace and showed me that he loves us through whatever lows we experience and whatever outbursts we might toss his way. We also learn, on the other side of suffering, that Jesus' faithfulness is richer and more significant. Our sufferings are the context in which we learn the depth of Jesus' obedience.

The writer of the Hebrews tells us, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:7-8). He suffered and walked through that suffering without wavering from the will of the Father. In spite of feeling like he had been abandoned by God, he

did not shrink from the torture and sacrifice of the cross. He became the man of suffering, familiar with pain out of his focused desire to do the will of the Father no matter the cost. He did so for our benefit. He is most worthy of praise!

At this point in the session material I suggest five things we need to remember to do when facing difficult times: Hang on, for God will not forsake us; Keep praying like Jesus did in the garden; Consider the possibility that even God doesn't get what he wants all the time; Abide in Scripture to orient us in the midst of disorientation; and Don't walk alone for there are times when we need to be carried along by the prayers of other Christians.

The Ortberg material provided the previous week introduces John of the Cross, in a very brief section of the chapter. While what John of the Cross wrote about the Dark Night of the Soul focused on purifying the soul on its journey toward union with God, I noted that the focus of that session was primarily discussing how difficulties might affect our lives of prayer. Suffering may be part of the dark night about which John of the Cross writes but his treatment of the dark night is not limited to the role of suffering. I did not discuss John of the Cross apart from the Ortberg material. I simply wanted our group to be aware of this 16th century mystic for their further study and consideration.

I elected not to hand out a new prayer practice at the end of session nine in favor of encouraging them to select a previous discipline to practice for the week. I did, however, hand out some guidelines for putting together a prayer plan, what Ruth Barton and others call a Rule of Life. She states, "A Rule of Life is a pattern of attitudes, behaviors, and practices—sacred rhythms—that we choose regularly and routinely in order to create space for God to do his

transforming work in our lives.”¹⁵⁹ In addition to the instructions that I prepared, I copied the section on “A Rule of Life” from Barton’s participant guide in case group members desired more material to prepare their plan.¹⁶⁰ This will be discussed further below.

Session ten was our celebration and debrief time together. We gathered, ate some snacks and discussed the three group debrief questions together.¹⁶¹ Following the group debrief, we discussed the prayer plan material. My hope in providing this material and encouragement was that this would not end up being “just another class” about prayer. Too often Christians gather to “learn” more and we *talk* about Scripture or spiritual disciplines but then we take the talking about the subject as the doing of it. For instance, we might talk about prayer or evangelism and go away from the “lesson” feeling like we had really prayed or evangelized when all we had done was talk about it. When this happens, learning hasn’t really occurred. It has not become part of life. This is perhaps one of my greatest fears in serving in located church ministry. I do not want to provide more content for disciples who already know more than they are doing. We need to help people obey what they know. We need to encourage, demonstrate, expect and guide into practice a way of living that enables people to hear from God and follow his leading obediently.

To that end, I provided the plan material. There I share two important questions from Barton: *Who do I want to be?* and *How do I want to live?* This idea of figuring out *How do I*

¹⁵⁹ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Spiritual Practices that Nourish Your Soul and Transform Your Life Participant’s Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 69.

¹⁶⁰ Barton, *Participant’s Guide*, 69-77.

¹⁶¹ See chapter 3 for the questions and examples of responses.

*want to live so I can be who I want to be?*¹⁶² is akin to Stephen Covey's admonishment to begin with the end in mind.¹⁶³ I sought to encourage the group participants to think long-term about the sort of person they hope to be and short-term regarding the steps they need to take now to get there. I provided blank calendars on which they could "map" out practices. I don't think that any of the participants filled out the calendar portion of the materials but they did state ways and practices that they hoped to continue in the future. It is my hope that we all seek to grow in intimacy with our Father through an ever-deepening conversational relationship with Him.

This chapter continued our conversation about this project by describing the various materials used with the group participants. The workbook materials and prayer practice materials were described and the approach to each session was discussed providing some understanding of the purpose of the particular session topics and practices in which we engaged.

¹⁶² Barton, *Participant's Guide*, 70-71.

¹⁶³ This is Habit number 2 of the highly acclaimed book by Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* which was originally published in 1989 the core of which is now available online at <https://www.franklincovey.com/the-7-habits/habit-2.html> accessed 12/19/19.

CHAPTER 3

ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

Having discussed the materials prepared for the participants' individual and group use, I now turn to the way in which each participant's experience was assessed.¹⁶⁴ Specifically, I am looking to discover in what ways the participants in this 10-week curriculum and group interaction on the theology and practices of prayer describe how their participation expanded their experiences in prayer.

There were three different approaches to assessing participant experience. Each participant completed a written survey prior to the group experience. This same survey was administered after session nine of the group experience to hand in to me at group session ten, the closing session. This provided a pre and post - experience perspective on each participant. During the course of the ten weeks there were also two personal interviews conducted of each participant individually to assess their ongoing experience.¹⁶⁵ Finally, the closing session included a group debrief during which the group responded to three questions about the overall experience.

The nine participants were made up of five women and four men. All participants were white, middle-class people ranging in age from twenty years old to mid-seventies. As noted, the participants all filled out a survey prior to the first session of the group experience and filled out

¹⁶⁴ During the invitation interview with each participant, each was asked to sign a covenant for the group which outlined expectations but also provided me with permission to record and use interview comments for this study. See Appendix D for the covenant.

¹⁶⁵ One participant was on vacation for two weeks during session two and three of the group. Therefore, he missed the first interview and had no experience upon which to reflect. Consequently, he was interviewed once.

the same survey just prior to the closing session of the group experience.¹⁶⁶ This survey was designed to help me understand the participants' previous experience with prayer and to see if there was any change after the experience. Certain of the questions on this survey corresponded to a larger study conducted by the Barna Group.¹⁶⁷ This allowed me to consider certain aspects of a participant's experience within a larger study context.

The Barna Study

The research for the Barna study was conducted online between June 5-9, 2017 with a nationally representative sample of 1,015 U.S. adults ranging in age from 18 and older. Self-identified Christians and past Christians comprised 888 of the respondents.

The study findings note that the vast majority of American adults pray alone (94%) and the majority of those most often pray silently (82% as opposed to 13% praying alone and audibly). When interpreting this data, Barna's editor in chief, Roxanne Stone, noted, "People pray mostly alone—it is a solitary activity defined primarily by the immediate needs and concerns of the individual. Corporate prayer and corporate needs are less compelling drivers in people's prayer lives."¹⁶⁸ In the Barna study, participants were asked to what the content of their

¹⁶⁶ The pre and post-experience survey questions may be found in Appendix E.

¹⁶⁷ Barna Group, "Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray," Research Releases in Faith and Christianity, August 15, 2017, accessed June 1, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/silent-solo-americans-pray/>.

¹⁶⁸ This and all subsequent references to this study come from the "Silent and Solo" study noted above.

prayers most often pertained. Gratitude and thanksgiving ranked highest among study respondents (62%) followed closely by the needs of my family and community (61%).¹⁶⁹

Pre and Post – experience survey observations

These findings, from the Barna study, helped me form some of the questions on the initial pre (and post) – experience survey used with my study group. They also encouraged me to go forward with my interest in putting people into prayer partner relationships as part of this experience. I sought to help group participants begin to get a glimpse of the fact that they are part of a praying community. Prayer is not their solitary possession.

Prior to the group experience 89% (8 people) of the participants noted that they primarily prayed silently and alone with 11% (1 person) noting that they prayed collectively with a church predominantly.¹⁷⁰ After the group experience the results were substantially the same with 78% (7 people) praying alone and silently and 22% (2 people) praying alone and audibly. While I did receive, in conversations, verbal confirmation of the benefit and importance of the prayer partner relationship, meeting once a week to pray together did not significantly influence this response

¹⁶⁹ See Appendix F figure 1 to see the graph of the rest of these responses.

¹⁷⁰ Prior to the first session of the group, I invited our entire congregation to respond to the pre-experience survey. 77 people from the church responded, including the 9 group members who were part of this study. 86% (66 people) of the 77 respondents indicated that they prayed silently and alone. 10% (8 people) responded that they pray audibly alone, 3 % (2 people) indicated that they pray audibly with another person or group and 1% (1 person) indicated that they pray predominantly collectively with a church. Additionally, 49% (38 people) indicated that their prayer Always includes Gratitude and Thanksgiving, 38% (29 people) indicated that they did so Frequently, 12% (9 people) indicated Some and 1 person indicated Rarely. With regard to praying about Needs of family and community, 48% (37 people) indicated that they did Always, 42% (32 people) indicating doing so Frequently and 10% (8 people) indicating doing so Some. These two categories were the highest ranked among the congregation respondents.

on the survey. I did not expect it to alter responses but I did hope to help participants experience the benefit of praying with another person. Later in this study, this experience will be discussed.

I also asked participants whether they had a set time of prayer (or a “quiet time”) that they observed each day. Prior to the group experience 56% (5 people) of the participants indicated that they did not have a set time of prayer. That response went down to 22% (2 people) in the post – experience survey.

With regard to what characterizes the prayers of our group, I did not see significant changes in the pre and post – experience responses.

What characterizes your prayers? (Mark all that apply.)

9 responses

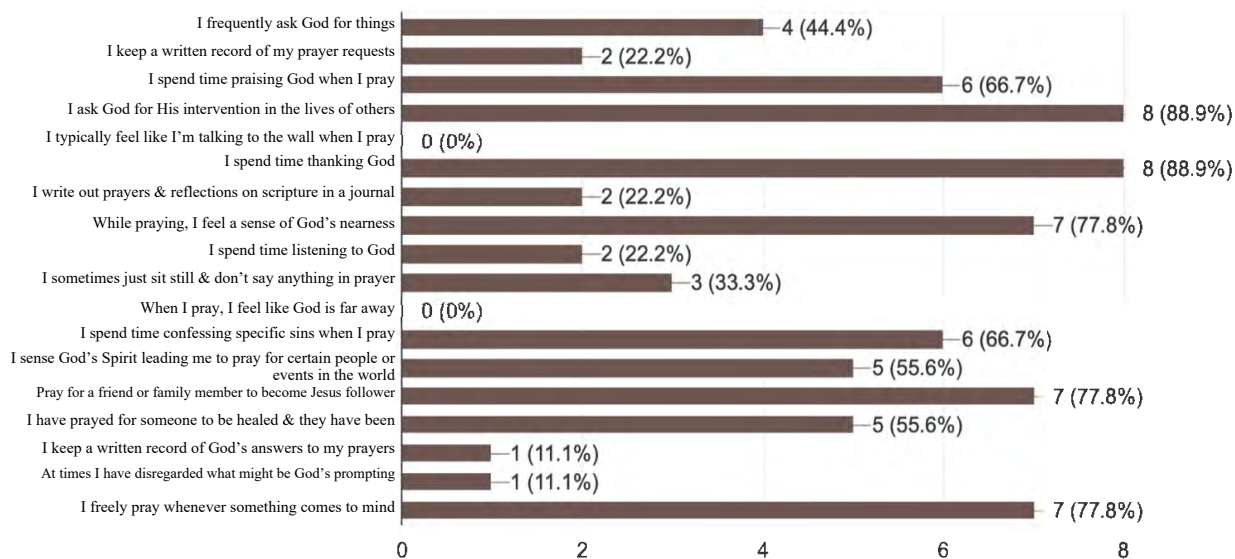


Figure 2 Pre-experience survey responses

What characterizes your prayers? (Mark all that apply.)

9 responses

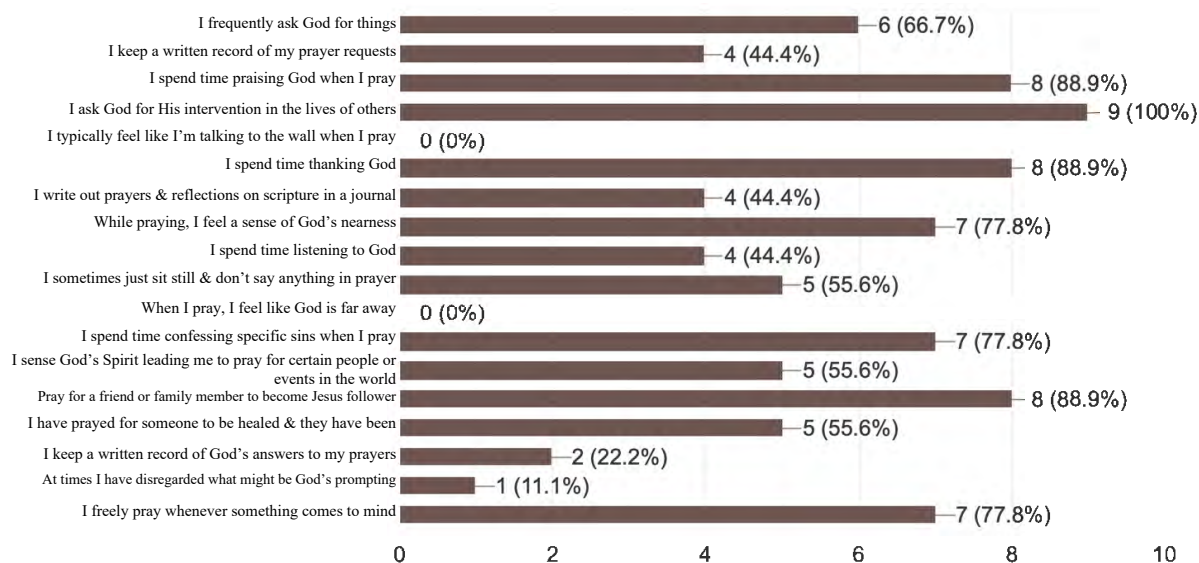


Figure 3 Post-experience survey responses

The majority included thanksgiving and praying for God's intervention in the lives of others prior to the group experience. This is group of people experienced in praying for others and relating to God through this spiritual practice. That is borne out further by the results of the pre and post – experience survey question requesting participants to indicate on a frequency scale of what content their prayers most often pertain.¹⁷¹ Four participants, in the pre-experience survey, rated Gratitude and Thanksgiving as being “always” part of their prayer, one “frequently” and four “some.” In the post-experience responses, six participants rated Gratitude and Thanksgiving as being “always” part of their prayer, two “frequently” and one “some.” The Needs of Family and Community was another consistently high ranking response among participants with seven of the participants ranking it as “frequently” (5 people) or “always” (2 people) a part of their

¹⁷¹ See Appendix F figures 4 and 5 for the graph of results of this survey question.

prayers in the pre-experience survey and eight participants ranking it as “frequently” (3 people) or “always” (5 people) a part of their prayers in the post-experience survey. These findings are in line with the findings of the Barna study which ranked Gratitude and Thanksgiving as well as Needs of Family and Community being the focus of the majority of prayers of the participants in that study.

When asked when they pray, the majority of participants noted that they pray at different times during the day. Even though some had set times of prayer, the group participants did not seem to view prayer as a task that once accomplished for the day was done. Rather this group understood, prior to this group experience, prayer may be serendipitous. This is also supported by the responses given above where the majority, in both pre and post – experience surveys noted that they freely pray whenever something comes to mind.

When asked whether they were comfortable praying out loud with others, the majority noted that they were comfortable praying with family and in small group settings. Prior to the experience there was one participant that noted that they were not comfortable praying with family members and two indicated not being comfortable praying in small group settings. After the group experience, 100% of the participants indicated that they were comfortable praying in a small group setting. In conversation, one woman indicated that while she was very uncomfortable praying with family and in small group settings, the group experience was good for her in that she did pray with the group, though, she confessed, her comfort level had not substantially increased. This was very encouraging to me and to the group.

The question of using particular prayers when they prayed went through an interesting change. The pre-experience survey indicated that majority did not use particular prayers when praying. One person indicated praying the Lord’s Prayer and using an acronym of some sort to

organize their prayer. No one made use of other Biblical prayers and no one prayed memorized prayers.

Do you use particular prayers when you pray? (Mark all that apply.)

9 responses

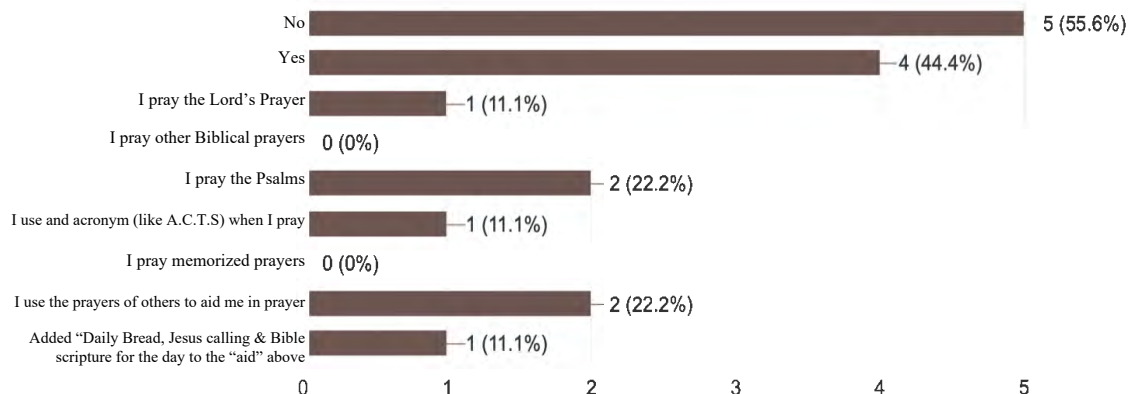


Figure 6. Pre-experience survey responses

Do you use particular prayers when you pray? (Mark all that apply.)

9 responses

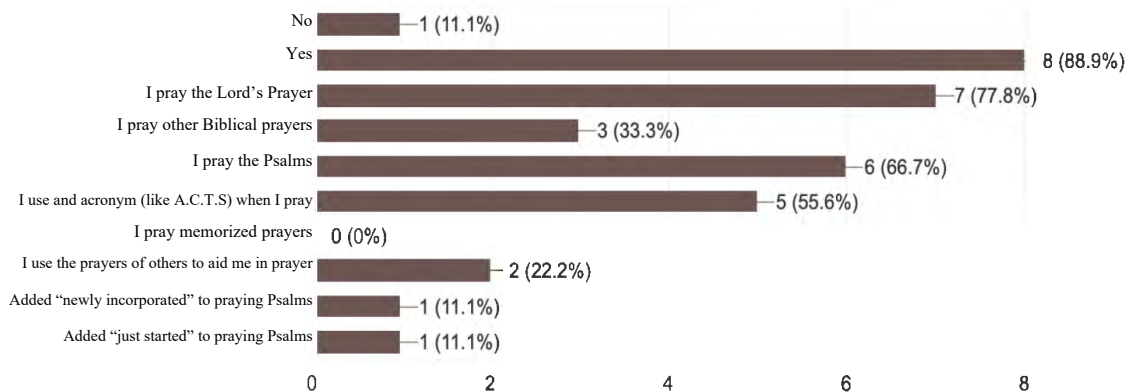


Figure 7. Post-experience survey responses

The post-experience survey indicated a shift in responses. The majority shifted to using particular prayers during their prayer times. This shift included using the Lord's Prayer, Biblical prayers, the Psalms and acronym prayers to help organize their prayer times. As noted in chapter

2 above, each of these sorts of prayer forms were discussed and practiced during this study. Therefore, the responses to the post-experience survey indicate that the majority of participants were exposed to and incorporated such forms of prayer during the time frame between the pre and post – experience surveys. As I turn attention to the mid-course personal interviews, I will discuss specific comments about this shift in particular.

Mid-course Personal Interviews

Two mid-course interviews were conducted.¹⁷² The questions were the same for both personal interviews.¹⁷³ Participants were asked to sign up for the first interview at the close of group session three. The second interview was scheduled after session seven. The point of these interviews was to determine several things. I was interested in ascertaining whether individual participants were tracking with the written material designed for group discussion. I was also interested in getting their feedback about the material itself as well as the material provided for the prayer practices. This was to help me determine what might need to be changed in group material or presentation to connect with particular participants. Finally, I wanted to check in on just how the prayer partner experience was going; whether that experience was positive or negative and why. Participants were also invited to share what they were learning about prayer and anything else that they wanted me to know.

¹⁷² As noted previously, one of the participants was on vacation during two weeks early in the group process (during session two and three) and so did not have experience upon which to reflect. He returned to the group after the first interview had been conducted.

¹⁷³ See Appendix G for the questions.

During the first interview there was encouraging feedback about the Lectio Divina prayer practice that they had recently practiced. Because of the broad positive feedback about it, I will begin this discussion with a listing of several comments. Such comments included:

“It forces you to slow down rather than just running through it. [You] don’t feel like you have to get it done in 20 minutes...it forces you to specify things to think about and pinpoints things to observe.”¹⁷⁴

“I like the Lectio and I’ve been using that. I didn’t know about it before. It made me stop, instead of reading several chapters and just go with a slower pace and hearing God better.”¹⁷⁵

“Lectio has been very helpful for me. Using scripture, for me, is exploratory. I’m taking something from Lectio and something from S.O.A.P.S. In the last week or ten days, I’ve looked at scripture differently than I did before...looking at it again and thinking of it from the angle of prayer is very helpful.”¹⁷⁶

“The Lectio was brand new and I tried it and it was eye opening for me. I never really make time to meditate and contemplate and pray about that. It was really peaceful and relaxing.”¹⁷⁷

“The Lectio was great. It’s a new focused way to approach scripture. Reading scripture is a form of prayer.”¹⁷⁸

These responses affirmed the choice of using this more liturgical approach to prayer. One of the participants, having been educated in a Catholic school, thought that it was too much like school and preferred the acronym prayer, A.C.T.S., with which she was accustomed.

As I noted in chapter 2, the point of introducing the Lectio Divina prayer practice was to help participants slow down and listen for God through the Scriptures. The above responses seem to show that was accomplished.

¹⁷⁴ Participant 9 (henceforth designating as P9), interview by author, Louisville, September 17, 2019. All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

¹⁷⁵ P8, interview by author, Louisville, September 17, 2019.

¹⁷⁶ P3, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

¹⁷⁷ P2, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

¹⁷⁸ P5, interview by author, Louisville, September 15, 2019.

With regard to the group times, participants appreciated the time together in particular as a community that is reflecting together on the topic of prayer. There were statements about the benefit of input from group members.

“I really like the group times...very much so, actually. I’m surprised that everyone participates so well. It’s inspiring.”¹⁷⁹

“The group itself is beneficial because we can practice these things on our own but we can’t fully grasp them until we talk amongst the group and learn from each other.”¹⁸⁰

“I’ve been surprised how good the group times are. People besides me are talking and they’re not talking about surface stuff. This is a great group of people who are in the word and are praying. The dynamics are great.”¹⁸¹

“I get a lot of help from the insights from others about what they’ve read. Sometimes I don’t look at it that way. I get set in my ways regarding how I pray...so hearing from others gives me more knowledge and how to use this myself. I get a different perspective hearing how people are thinking about the workbook information.”¹⁸²

This sense continued through the second interview and the group debrief as well.

“I’ve found it really beneficial to be present each week and follow along with the readings. I like the discussions. They are discussions that I don’t get through the rest of my week (like in class). They are a different type of discussion, perspective, angle. They’re helpful.”¹⁸³

“I find the group time beneficial because I’ve noticed the weeks when I’ve missed, it hasn’t gone as well. It’s nice to gather together and have the encouragement that comes from being in the group.”¹⁸⁴

“When you told me about this group and said that you’d have to pray about my participation due to my vacation, I thought maybe I could get the material even if I couldn’t attend. But I know it wouldn’t be the same without the group participation. Hearing everyone’s viewpoints and experiences is priceless. The group materials are great but the group experience is so helpful.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ P1, interview by author, Louisville, September 15, 2019.

¹⁸⁰ P2, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

¹⁸¹ P5, interview by author, Louisville, September 15, 2019.

¹⁸² P6, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

¹⁸³ P2, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

¹⁸⁴ P4, interview by author, Louisville, October 17, 2019. This is the participant who had only one interview due to vacation during weeks 2 and 3.

“I was really struck last Wednesday night when we talked about difficult things. I looked around the circle and could see it in others’ eyes, and felt it, obviously the Lord knew what he was doing when he designed the church. We need each other. It’s easier to persevere when you have someone with you.”¹⁸⁶

Group session materials were found to be beneficial. While some felt that it was hard to remember everything, the majority was able to follow the flow of thought, get the point of the material and find it resonate with them.

“The one about God was really helpful. I never really thought about praying and thinking about God that way. To ponder the God we think of [and how that affects prayer].”¹⁸⁷

“I like the workbook material. I’m more of a visual learner. So it’s helpful that I have something tangible to go back to. Especially as we explore the different ways to pray; How to use Scripture in prayer. That has been really helpful. I haven’t really done that before and so that’s [having workbook material] a way of exploring it a little deeper.”¹⁸⁸

“It’s been helpful. I’ll tell you I think it’s deep. You have to really pay attention when reading. It’s not for leisurely reading. It’s meant to be thought provoking...and drawing you closer to where you ought to be in prayer life and relationship with God. It’s intellectual and thought provoking. It’s appropriate for what we’re trying to do.”¹⁸⁹

“I liked looking up the Scriptures about God. I loved that. It never hurts to be reminded of his wonderful qualities. The material could be a little longer but for the group as a whole, it’s about the right length. I don’t think you’re talking over our heads. I think it’s relatable. In other words, you’re not acting like a professor.”¹⁹⁰

“Some of them [session material] are perfect and others are, because of time, a bit long. One of them was beyond me or excessive in content. I’m not a Bible scholar. So for a scholar this may be great but to me it might feel like it’s long.”¹⁹¹

“I appreciate you have illustrations that run through and stories are more approachable for some folks.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁵ P4, interview by author, Louisville, group debrief Question 2, October 28, 2019.

¹⁸⁶ P1, interview by author, Louisville, group debrief Question 2, October 28, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ P2, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

¹⁸⁸ P3, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

¹⁸⁹ P5, interview by author, Louisville, September 15, 2019.

¹⁹⁰ P7, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

¹⁹¹ P9, interview by author, Louisville, September 17, 2019.

¹⁹² P1, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

“I love the depth of thinking it requires. The content is great. The quotes from others are deep. You have to read them and think about them some more. I’m enjoying reading it.”¹⁹³

Through the interview process I learned that I should not have “fill in the blank” materials requiring a lot of searching for Scripture references but rather have the Scriptures printed for the participants. The session two material about the character of God had several Scriptures to look up and fill in some blanks about God’s character. Some felt this was too tedious and chose not to look up all the texts.

The prayer practices seemed to be encouraging and, in some cases, stretching even providing some new “tools” for the practice of prayer with the exception of scheduling issues or disinterest.

“I try to do them all. Some of them didn’t fit my personality. The one that really resonated with me was the scripture reading and meditating on it. I didn’t like the breath prayer or the prayer cycle. I’m glad to know those other techniques and will probably try them again at different times but right now they haven’t helped that much.”¹⁹⁴

“It focuses me on things I didn’t realize or think about or how to hone in on [in Scripture]. It definitely, gives me more tools. I can start looking at Scripture ... focusing on a certain word or phrase and just dwell on it, meditate on it. It’s really helped me out.”¹⁹⁵

“I have been praying Scripture. I turned Psalm 8 into a prayer. I don’t do that all the time but I really enjoyed doing that. It was praying back to him his word...it was awesome!”¹⁹⁶

“The practices are really good...especially if you’re experiencing...in particular for me, the breath prayers, especially during a difficult time, I can see myself using that more often. There are just some times when you don’t know what you want to say with God. I know I’ll use that.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ P5, interview by author, Louisville, October 14, 2019.

¹⁹⁴ P4, interview by author, Louisville, October 17, 2019.

¹⁹⁵ P9, interview by author, Louisville, October 14, 2019.

¹⁹⁶ P8, interview by author, Louisville, October 15, 2019.

¹⁹⁷ P3, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

“I wasn’t familiar with the Zúme Prayer Cycle. That was incredible and I will hold onto that forever.”¹⁹⁸

The prayer partner experience was mixed for the participants. Of the ten original members of this study group, five were men and five were women. I assigned prayer partners. Each sex had a group of two and a group of three. One prayer partnership turned out to be a very good combination. The two men connected persistently and were blessed by one another in those connection times. The other men’s partnerships did not connect as persistently due to vacation and lack of follow through. One of the original members of the group of three dropped out of the study completely after the first session leaving nine members to our group rather than the original ten. There was also a challenge with phone connections for the second men’s prayer partnership group. The women who were part of the three prayer partners initially hit it off very well. They were surprised and encouraged by the way they meshed so well together relationally. They met for lunch and got to know one another but they seldom prayed in their restaurant setting. The other prayer partner group of two women knew each other already and relationally connected easily. However, due to schedules, even these women had a challenge meeting together to pray.

The goal of the prayer partnerships, as stated in chapter 2 above, was to help the participants recognize that they are part of a praying community. Prayer is not their sole possession, a private thing practiced only alone.¹⁹⁹ At one point, I explained that prayer is often

¹⁹⁸ P1, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

¹⁹⁹ As I write this section, I am sitting at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, KY. The Trappist monks here recognize the importance of community in the life of the contemplative. They worship and pray together in community seven to eight times per day, depending on the day, beginning at 3:15 a.m.

“caught” from one another. We hear others praying in our ears, when we pray. We automatically, whether we choose to or not, pray like those with whom we pray. Therefore, I sought to establish these prayer partnerships to aid in the process of growing in our practice of prayer.

I elected to give instructions to these prayer partners exclusively verbally during our sessions. I did this hoping to keep these partnerships more informal. I didn’t want there to be yet another written assignment for them to look to do. However, because it wasn’t written down, the instruction sometimes was left unstated. Through the interview process regarding these partnerships, I learned that I needed to be more vocal, specific and overt about the expectations and instructions for the prayer partnerships.²⁰⁰ There was some confusion among the three women that they thought of it (or treated it) like a social time of interaction rather than something that would help them in their actual prayer lives. It became clear after the initial interview that I needed to be more explicit with the instructions. When I made the intent clearer, it seemed to deflate the women’s group of three. They had become accustomed to thinking of it in a certain way and they had a hard time reorienting their thinking about their time together.

I still believe the partnerships are a valuable part of this experience. One of the participants stated, “I’m really grateful for the relationships in the group. I’d recommend the prayer partner aspect of this every time. If you ever need a cheerleader for prayer partners, I’d love to share.”²⁰¹

In each of the mid-course personal interview I asked for the participants to share the most important thing that they were learning about prayer. Responses included:

“The aha moment on Wednesday night about the heart of God. Asking God, ‘How’s your day? How are you feeling about the hungry kids? How are you feeling about those who

²⁰⁰ The verbal instructions that I had outlined to give weekly may be seen in Appendix D.

²⁰¹ P1, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

suffer the pain of hate resulting from racism? What are you suffering?’ It never even occurred to me to ask questions of God.”²⁰²

“That prayer is a two-lane street. A lot of people think of it as communicating just with God and not have him communicating with you. Learning to be open to hearing what God has to say and knowing that he will speak if we listen. That you have to be committed to it. It’s not just that I can pray when I want but praying consistently is really important. That’s one thing I’m learning that is super important.”²⁰³

“It’s o.k. to let go of some of those standardized thoughts you had about prayer before. You get into a routine, that ‘this is how you pray’ and it’s o.k. to let go of that. And for me, letting go of it, has allowed me to be freer [in prayer] or it’s enough to pray a breath prayer. Especially if you’ve been in church for a long time, if it doesn’t have the powerful, impactful punch, [you feel like] you haven’t done the job.”²⁰⁴

“That you can be in prayerful state of mind all the time. Abiding in him all day...not necessarily on your knees. Every day in and out abiding in him all day. It’s been good for me to realize that I did that, I do that. I am doing what I am supposed to be doing. I just didn’t realize it.”²⁰⁵

“Making yourself still enough to be able to sit before Father and praise him and pour out your heart to him and let him speak back to you through his word or the Holy Spirit. The Lectio, especially, has been very helpful in this.”²⁰⁶

“I feel like I’m getting more responsive to his voice. I’ve not been a very good listener in the past but I feel like he’s getting through to me. It seems like he’s getting through to me more these days. I’m hoping I’m being more sensitive to his promptings.”²⁰⁷

The final question of the two mid-course personal interview asked for the participants to share anything else they’d like me to know about their experience. Some of these answers were particular encouraging.

“It’s opened up a new world for me by taking this class. The one time I was doing the Zúme thing, God spoke to me about another Scripture from years ago. It just came back and that was so cool.”²⁰⁸

²⁰² P1, interview by author, Louisville, September 15, 2019.

²⁰³ P2, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

²⁰⁴ P3, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

²⁰⁵ P5, interview by author, Louisville, September 15, 2019.

²⁰⁶ P8, interview by author, Louisville, September 17, 2019.

²⁰⁷ P7, interview by author, Louisville, October 15, 2019.

“It’s a growing experience. I’d like to say, ‘I’ll never go back to that other way’ [of praying]. It really has made me more mindful about prayer. There’s a self-satisfaction that comes because you realize your relationship with God is so much different.”²⁰⁹
 “I’m just more aware of the fact I need to listen to Him. I just need to be quiet and listen to Him more. I’m not dozing off during prayer lately! The past 2-3 weeks at least.”

Group Debrief Questions

The closing debrief was a group celebration experience on the last night of our time together. During half of the hour, I posed three questions. Following each question are sample responses.

Thinking back over our sessions what pieces were most helpful in your relationship with God?

“For me and this was a serendipitous thing was when we prayed for P8. Putting what we were talking about into practice was cool. That evening was very touching for me. My prayers prior to this group were intercessory, task-oriented, I didn’t take time to listen or sense the presence of God. That has changed for me.”²¹⁰

“The prayer partner aspect. Having the encouragement of this guy (pointing to his prayer partner), his example to me, it was really encouraging.”²¹¹

“Even though I’ve journaled for years, more like a diary of something that is going on – I write out goals at the beginning of the year, what’s happening now, how I did at the end of the year... It never dawned on me to journal for prayer time. Doing that now has been helpful to remember what I read and what I wrote on the Scripture and I compose a prayer. It’s very strengthening for me. Previously, I forgot what I read but now I can look at my journal on what I’ve read.”²¹²

²⁰⁸ P9, interview by author, Louisville, October 14, 2019. This participant also sent me the following via text between his first and second interview: “Thank you for handing out the Zúme Prayer Cycle; it has really helped me this morning; it is the 1st time that I think I have ever spent just 1 on 1 time with our Lord; It has really got me focused and touched on the whole gamut of things I should be thinking about but a lot of the time don’t. It has been great. God bless you my brother in Christ.” P9, text message to author, October 5, 2019.

²⁰⁹ P3, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

²¹⁰ P4, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹¹ P2, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹² P6, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

Overall, how has your participation in this group expanded your experience in prayer?

“Before when people would ask me to pray for them, I would write it down and pray for them when I got home. Now I pray now with them and it means a lot more.”²¹³

“I approach Scripture in a very different way, slowing down, taking time and listening to hear what God is saying. It’s a whole different approach to Scripture.”²¹⁴

“I was never comfortable praying in a group. I confess that I’m still not comfortable. I wish I was more comfortable...I was kind of forced to do it. I called myself a closet pray-er. I went off by myself, I don’t even pray with my family. One of the reasons I held back from joining the group is because I’m uncomfortable about praying with others. But the Lord used it to help me.”²¹⁵

How do you anticipate using any of the tools you learned about in the future?

“Prayer walking will be something I do. While I’m walking to class, I can pray for people, things I see, it’s something simple I can do throughout my day. Journaling too...it has been a good way for me to organize my thoughts.”²¹⁶

“The Jesus Prayer and breath prayers. Those short prayers are helpful to calm down.”²¹⁷

“I’m thinking that I’m going to go through the practices list and use each one of them once a week.”²¹⁸

“Praying every other month with my prayer partner and slowing down in Bible reading to hear from God.”²¹⁹

During this group debrief, one of the participants pointed out something I had not considered. She noted,

“The multi-generational mix-sex group has been very beneficial for me. I haven’t been part of a multi-generational co-ed group for like fourteen years. This was good. It gives me insight into the way the men feel about certain things...how they pray (I didn’t know he used the Daily Bread like I do) and hear about how they understand and practice

²¹³ P8, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹⁴ P9, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹⁵ P6, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹⁶ P2, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹⁷ P7, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹⁸ P1, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²¹⁹ P9, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

prayer. It was also good to hear what the younger generations are doing to get closer to the Lord.”²²⁰

I had not considered the way in which this make up might affect the learning process. That’s likely very short-sighted of me. I purposely segregated the prayer partners because I wanted those more intimate settings to be same sex. However, I did not consider the way in which the group learning process would be enhanced by the co-ed, multi-generational aspect of the group. This was a happy serendipity or “God-incidence” for which I wish I could take credit. I cannot.

Individual Journeys

It may be helpful to follow the journey of two or three participants who traveled with me through this study group. I have selected three people to provide a portrait of their experience based on their surveys and personal conversations that I have had with each of them along the way. Since some of their comments have been included in the material above, I will seek not to duplicate those portions of material but rather will seek to provide a sense in which there was some movement or growth, in his or her perception, in their relationship with God or their understanding and practice of prayer.

Participant 2 (P2) is a 20-year old college student who studies business at the University of Louisville. He grew up in a Christian home and has been part of the church for many years. He is a sensitive, aware young man with a deep desire to follow Jesus and grow in that relationship. P2 came into the experience not having a set time of prayer but praying four – five times a week silently by himself. He had prayed for an hour prior to coming to this experience as part of a Zúme Project group which I led within the previous year. He came to the group with

²²⁰ P6, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

interest in exploring, in his language: the importance of prayer, different types of prayer for certain situations, how to pray with and for non-believers and strangers, how to incorporate prayer into all aspects of his day and how to be intent on listening during prayer rather than always talking.²²¹

P2 is generally pretty quiet in groups but that doesn't mean that he's not thinking or that things aren't going on inside. He thinks deeply and is attentive. He is self-aware and admitted being initially intimidated in the group. He noted that he felt young in that context recognizing that he previously knew only a couple of the people who were part the group (two other members of this study group were also part of the Zúme Project group with him). He stated during the first personal interview, "I feel like I haven't been very open in group and hope to talk more in the group time. ... I feel like these other people are old and wise and I feel a little intimidated but it's not something I should be worried about going forward."²²²

In the introductory session, when asked what he hoped to glean from the group, P2 noted that he hoped to learn to pray with purpose and not just because he had to or out of obligation. I believe that the subtle changes that are evident between the pre and post – experience surveys demonstrate that he is taking steps in that direction. In the pre-experience survey, he noted that he did not have a set time of prayer or quiet time that he observed each day. In the post-experience survey, he noted that he did. This is a step toward being more purposeful. It could also be a response to praying out of obligation as well, however, so we need to look further in his data to note what other shifts may describe his growth. In his post-experience survey, P2 stated that he had begun keeping a written record of his prayer requests and that he had begun writing

²²¹ P2, interview by author, pre-experience survey, Louisville, n.d.

²²² P2, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

out prayers and reflections on scripture in a journal. Neither of these were indicated in his pre-experience survey. In the group debrief time, to the question regarding which tools he might use in the future, he stated, “Journaling has been a good way for me to organize my thoughts.”²²³ He also noted, “Praying consistently is really important. That’s one thing I’m learning that is super important.”²²⁴

During the second personal interview, P2 opened up about something he was learning that shows a learning moment for him. These comments have been used here and previously but putting them all together provides particular insight into the shift happening in his heart.

“One thing that stuck out to me this week is what we talked about last week in terms of what we should and shouldn’t take to God in prayer. Knowing that God wants to hear all of your prayers and all of your thoughts all the time; there’s nothing too big and nothing too small that you could take to God that he wouldn’t have an answer for so if you’re willing to trust in Him and do that. ... That’s one of the things I had always struggled with I guess you could say a doubt in my mind. Always going through my day feeling like some things that I had prayed about before were pointless or meaningless to pray about this. Did God want to hear? So I honestly just stopped praying about them and tried to pray about things that I thought were more important held more ‘value,’ I guess you could say, rather than praying about the smaller things...and also praying continuously throughout the day, I had never done that before but this has made me realize that prayer isn’t just something you do at certain times but is something you can do continuously.”²²⁵

In the same interview he also reflected on a discussion we had in a group session regarding the way in which we view God affects the way we approach him in prayer. He noted that everyone “views God differently and because of that they pray differently.” This indicated to me that this group conversation during session two, the first week of September, was still in his mind a

²²³ P2, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²²⁴ P2, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

²²⁵ P2, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

month later when we had the personal interview mid-October. It appears that his view of God was expanding and his approach to prayer was growing and developing as well.

P2 was also heavily influenced by his prayer partner experience. His partnership was the most apparently beneficial of the various partnerships about which I heard. He noted in each interview that his experience was very encouraging. He and his partner met initially in a mall near a Starbucks and they prayed there together. He admitted he would never have prayed in public like that alone. The place of their prayer times shifted as they were encouraged to pray for longer amounts of time due to the need for a bit more silence. They went to the library where they could still be in public and pray for people but they were a little more secluded. He acknowledged that the encouragement and accountability of the prayer partnership was very important to him and was one of the pieces of the study experience that was a significant aid in his relationship with God.

He also stated that he would be taking advantage of prayer walking during the day as he walked to class. Since he had to walk to class anyway, he would acknowledge God in that time and pray for people and things that he saw. This is another indicator of his growing awareness that prayer is an ongoing conversational relationship with God. In the closing group debrief, he concluded, "Growing up, I learned to pray from my parents and my church. It was the only way I saw prayer. I didn't have much exposure to different forms of prayer. This group expanded my vision of what prayer is, why and how I can pray."²²⁶ These descriptions answer our question regarding the ways his participation expanded his experience in prayer. I'm so grateful to journey with this young man as he follows Jesus.

²²⁶ P2, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

Our next journey follows Participant 6, a woman in her seventies of Roman Catholic background and education. She has weathered tragedy and health challenges and was the most hesitant of all group members to commit to being part of this study. She stated that she does not pray with other people and was concerned about how this group might be too uncomfortable for her to join in whole-heartedly. She rose to the challenge, however, and openly prayed vocally, to my surprise, with the group the very first night of our group sessions. P6 is a very experienced person of prayer having prayed for an hour each morning for a number of years. She was very open during our group sessions about her thoughts regarding the material and freely indicated her appreciation or apathy about particular discussion topics. She expressed an interest in praying with confidence and expectancy that the Lord hears our prayers and accepting whatever the answer is because he answers over and above what we think or ask.²²⁷ I believe that is a conviction that she had coming in to the group.

The most significant shifts that can be seen between the pre and post-experience surveys are indicators of her use of journaling to reflect upon Scripture, spending time sitting still and listening to God without saying anything in prayer. She also noted that she became more comfortable praying with the prayer group, though she was still not completely comfortable.²²⁸ She expressed that it was very encouraging being part of the group because it provided her with different insights and perspectives on prayer, in general, and on the discussion topics, in particular. “I get set in my ways of how I pray. So hearing from others gives me more knowledge

²²⁷ P2, interview by author, pre-experience survey, Louisville, n.d.

²²⁸ P6, interview by author, post-experience survey, Louisville, n.d.

and how to use it myself. I get a different perspective hearing other people talk about the information in the workbook.”²²⁹

Though she acknowledged that the workbook fill-in-the-blank section was tedious and she didn't really learn anything new about God, she still did the work. She also noted that the Lectio reminded her of her Catholic school experience. She expressed appreciation for the ACTS model, which she already used, and expressed that she would continue to use her Daily Bread and Jesus Calling books but that she had added making notes in her journal about what she noticed in these and in the daily Scriptures that she was reading. She admitted that too often she forgot what she felt she was learning or hearing from the Lord and it had never occurred to her to use her journal as a means of connecting with God. She also had begun writing out a prayer and found this also very meaningful.²³⁰ This is one significant shift for her experience of prayer. She has begun using something she regularly does, journaling, as a means of keeping her focus on what she and the Father had discussed in her prayer times.

She said she was growing in using Scripture more and that seeking a phrase as a way of hearing what the Lord was seeking to tell her was helpful. Reflecting upon the character of God brought her “back to a point of awe or fear that the Father is so great and awesome. In the Old Testament no one could see Him because it was too much.” She admittedly focused on the Father nature of God so that she could relate more to him but then recognized that this somehow made him less the awesome God that he is. “I need to combine the two of them. I can feel like I can be cherished by Him. But I have to think of him as Father because He's too much to

²²⁹ P6, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

²³⁰ Ibid.

comprehend with my finite mind.”²³¹ She is still growing and seeking to grasp the nature of God noting that “the part of my prayer life that I have the most trouble with is the Trinity. Trying to figure out who the Holy Spirit is. Jesus said that he was going to send a Helper. Is that the Spirit of the Father or the Son or the Father and the Son but he’s also his own person. Who is the Spirit?”²³² We sat in the tension of this question during our conversation acknowledging that God is indeed beyond our figuring out but that we relate to him with the language that she knew from Scripture and cast ourselves relationally upon him trusting in his love and care for us.

P6 was very open about the fact that some of the practices were not interesting to her. She felt that she was more comfortable with the modes of prayer she had been practicing for years and found herself returning to those. I affirmed her in doing so and encouraged her to see as significant the ways in which she had stated that she was adding to those times through her journaling and adding time to sit and reflect. She admitted that “sitting quietly is not one of my fortes.”²³³ One growth area for her was her ability to admit that this was the first small group she had been part of for over a decade. She acknowledged that she really appreciated the sincerity of the group members and was confident that they pray for what is shared in the group time. She stated that she prayed for them and that she believed they prayed for her as well. P6 is the participant who so insightfully commented on the multi-generational / co-ed nature of the group being such an advantage to her. When I followed up with her about her potential future

²³¹ P6, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ P2, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

involvement in a group, she stated, “If it was small like this, I would definitely go. ... If there was one, I think I’d avail myself of that.”²³⁴

Knowing that she was hesitant to be part of this study, I purposely placed P6 with a friend as a prayer partner. She noted that they had a few schedule conflicts but that they “went way back” relationally and she appreciates her prayer partner very much noting that she would like to continue to prayer walk from time to time with her. In my mind, this is a significant shift in her practice. This self-identified “closet pray-er”²³⁵ who was initially very uncomfortable praying with others (and still is uncomfortable praying with family) is willing to continue to pray in community with her prayer partner and with others in a small group setting with whom she feels safe and confident in their care and confidentiality.

This narrative traces the way in which this participant describes how this group has expanded her experience in prayer, by increasing her focus through the use of journaling, by feeling more comfortable praying with other believers and by a willingness to include prayer walking with a prayer partner on a regular basis. What a joy to walk with this sister along her journey with Jesus.

Our third journey finds us with a sister in her fifties who works for an insurance company. Participant 3 was fairly quiet in group settings but opened up and contributed in ways that revealed a deep mind and a somewhat heavy heart. She stated that she had been going through some family challenges during this season of life and acknowledged that this group was very helpful for her during this time.²³⁶ She came into the group hoping to form a more

²³⁴ P6, interview by author, Louisville, October 17, 2019.

²³⁵ P6, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²³⁶ P3, interview by author, post-experience survey, Louisville, n.d.

consistent structure for her prayer time and to become more passionate about her prayer life. She indicated an interest in learning to pray Scripture and wanted to explore more structured prayer. She initially indicated that she prayed many times a day, silently by herself, but did not have a set time of prayer each day. This shifted for her between her pre-experience survey and her post-experience survey. She indicated that she did have a consistent time of prayer each day while continuing to pray many times each day.

Various other shifts are worth noting in her surveys as well. Her post-experience survey noted that she added a time of praise and spending time in God's presence without saying anything to her times of prayer. In the group debrief, she reaffirmed this by noting, "I liked when you talked about being present with God...not really saying anything but just taking deliberate time to be still. That is impactful for me who feels like I run around all the time."²³⁷ Whereas her pre-experience survey indicated that she was uncomfortable praying with others, her post-experience survey noted that she had become comfortable praying with others. Gratitude and Thanksgiving had become a regular part of her prayer time which she identified as "always" part of her prayer times. She specifically noted that she had begun praying Psalms and using an acronym when she prays noting these as "newly incorporated" into her prayer time.²³⁸ She wrote that her prayer practices

"are ever evolving and you have given me additional, useful tools. I like the idea of the 'presence' of Jesus you discussed. While I have not been present an hour, I am in his presence a little longer than before. I am still struggling with my personal season and these sessions have really helped. I think, in the future, I will be able to move into a more structured prayer time. Using the Psalms has been very helpful and beneficial and I really

²³⁷ P3, interview by author, group debrief, Louisville, October 28, 2019.

²³⁸ P3, interview by author, post-experience survey, Louisville, n.d.

like the hour-long cycle. I have broken it down into smaller chunks and have found it to be very useful.”²³⁹

She noted that having the workbook material was beneficial for her as a visual learner. It provided something tangible for her to return to in order to continue to process our discussions. She felt this was especially true as we continued to discuss the various new ways of praying and utilizing Scripture in prayer. This was something new for her and she seemed fascinated by this way of exploring the Scriptures noting, “In the last week or ten days, I’ve looked at Scripture differently than before.”²⁴⁰ As she considered Scripture as a tool or avenue of prayer, she seemed to be reforming some thoughts about the way in which God might speak to her through the Scriptures. In the second interview with her, she noted that the workbook material helped her be more focused enabling “more meaningful engagement” of the tools we were discussing and in prayer more generally.²⁴¹

P3 also acknowledged that she was becoming more mindful of opportunities to pray. In the past, she had thought about praying but never really did and this group helped her be more mindful of taking advantage of opportunities to pray. Such different perspectives, she described as “a real growing experience” noting that she hoped that she wouldn’t return to former ways of praying or thinking about prayer. She felt a significant shift in her relationship with God.²⁴²

She also expressed significant appreciation for the breath prayers noting that especially during a difficult time when you don’t know what you want to say, the breath prayer puts you in

²³⁹ P3, interview by author, post-experience survey, Louisville, n.d.

²⁴⁰ P3, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

²⁴¹ P3, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

²⁴² P3, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

God's presence and helps you focus on that phrase. She noted that because of her current experience in this season of life that "breath prayers have just been really impactful."²⁴³

Her prayer partner experience began really well, "terrific" in fact. She noted that they were connecting and she was surprised at how much they had in common with regard to everything from personal relationships to finances. It led her to ask me how much energy I had put into matching the prayer partners. I discussed my process and the rationale and she noted that it was a God thing that they were together. She saw the partnership as "an opportunity for us to lean on one another with things in our lives."²⁴⁴ Sadly, what began as a great connection became overwhelmed by scheduling challenges which kept them from connecting consistently.

Through these various comments I have noted that P3 has taken advantage of the tools that are leading her toward a more structured time of prayer. However, of more import to me, is the sense that she is growing in her understanding of the love God has for her. Her ability to rest in the presence of God and experience him apart from words and the balm that she is experiencing for her wounded heart is why I wanted to share her journey here. She is finding that God receives her in the midst of her rushing and through the storm of personal experience and is finding that she can rest in his presence with a simple breath prayer. She described how her understanding of God's closeness through breath prayer and how prayer partners have encouraged her to understand that God is present in the midst of the challenges she is currently facing. I have been honored to walk with this sister as she has journeyed with us in community.

In this chapter, I have discussed the three ways in which I sought to track the experience of the study participants in order to discover in what ways the participants in this 10-week

²⁴³ P3, interview by author, Louisville, October 16, 2019.

²⁴⁴ P3, interview by author, Louisville, September 16, 2019.

curriculum and group interaction on the theology and practices of prayer describe how their participation expanded their experiences in prayer. Through the pre and post – experience surveys, mid-course personal interviews and a group debrief I sought to have a continuing dialogue with group participants to ensure that they were tracking with the session content, were trying to experience the prayer practices and seeking to connect with their prayer partners. Each participant had varying experiences. Each had unique descriptions regarding how their involvement in this study has expanded their experience in prayer. I have shown through the above descriptions that their participation in this group experience was beneficial to their ongoing prayer journeys and believe that is shown through the above assessment responses and the narrated journeys of select participants.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

There are a variety of things that you learn after the initial experience of a study like this. I believe that it was worthwhile for both me and the group. However, as with any study, I am uncertain about the long-term effect of the experience upon us. When such a group concludes, it seems that the lack of ongoing camaraderie and accountability might inevitably result in diminished practice of the newly learned forms of prayer. What was learned would no longer be reinforced by your prayer partner or fellow group members because those formal gatherings ended. The importance of being part of a praying community for our own individual prayer life was experienced during the group process. Any post-group waning of individual prayer practices would also be evidence of the importance of being part of a praying community. Would practices be continued? Regardless, I believe that the doors and windows opened during this study provide opportunities for, or even just glimpses at, other prayer forms that may be practiced even if only occasionally. Here are a few of the things I learned, would do differently or wonder about.

I heard from more than one member of the group that looking up the various scriptures in the Session 2 workbook material was tedious. They preferred for the Bible texts to be printed. This is an easy accommodation. I prefer that they focus on the point of the verses rather than frustrating them with the task of finding them. The next round of the material will have the scriptures printed in the body of the text.

Contrary to my concerns about the lack of ongoing practice of the new approaches to prayer post-group, I have heard via email from several participants that they are, in fact, continuing to use several of the practices. I asked them two questions via email sent to group members on February 6, 2020, three months after the group concluded: 1) What are you doing

[actual behavior(s)] daily, weekly or monthly as a result of being in the group that studied and practiced prayer? And 2) What, if any, changes have occurred in *the way* you pray as a result of being part of the group? Here are a few of the responses I received.

I haven't gotten together with my prayer partner, though we see each other at church and had good intentions. The thing that I added to my daily morning ritual is journaling about the bible reading because it helps me to remember it and I often get a different perspective on it.²⁴⁵

I am meeting with my prayer partner every other month. I feel I am praying more often than before the group.²⁴⁶

I'm reading from the source for prayer with greater intensity and scrutiny than ever before. But the biggest change is being "present" in prayer. The monastery story really inspired that. Before, I was not engaged in "present" prayer. I use the Bible for prayer WAY MORE than I ever imagined! (It was not something I was comfortable with and really did not use it effectively.) In the question above I suggest that I scrutinize scripture reading with a better eye and seeing prayer used through those words. It's exciting. I am not a spontaneous person in prayer or otherwise and that is definitely different. But, present prayer is a new practice.²⁴⁷

The most obvious change I have made has been with the "breath prayers" I had an unpleasant surprise yesterday so when I was in bed I used scripture, especially Philippians 4, 6-7 to help me to calm down & receive God's peace. It took me a while to go to sleep but I finally did! Thanks for asking & thank you for your prayers for me & my family! Praising God has also helped me this year.²⁴⁸

I still have my orange folder (you will have to pry it out of my hands:)) on my side desk at home. I reference it often. The following is a brief listing of the impact that the prayer materials/ group experience has had on my life for Christ:

- I continue to work to incorporate one of the themes into my schedule at least once per week, in addition to my daily Bible reading and prayer time
- I have used a few of the themes in our family devotions, teaching them to my wife and kids
- I had some experience with breath prayers before joining the prayer group, but did not feel incredibly comfortable with the practice. I now use breath prayers at the

²⁴⁵ P6, email message to author, February 6, 2020.

²⁴⁶ P9, email message to author, February 6, 2020.

²⁴⁷ P3, email message to author, February 6, 2020.

²⁴⁸ P7, email message to author, February 7, 2020.

hospital regularly with Christian patients who are struggling with great grief and/or anxiety. It amazes me how meeting the Lord in this way, brings them and me great comfort and peace from the Lord

- I still check in regularly with my prayer partner and we lift each other up regularly in prayer

Thanks so much for allowing me to be a part of the group!²⁴⁹

Although I am sad to say, but need to be honest, my prayer life has gone back to what it was before. I prayer walk once every couple of weeks. I do pray at 1:00 for my family that needs to be saved, as the reminder pops up on my phone. [My prayer partner] and I have met once for lunch and prayer, since the study ended.²⁵⁰

As a result of being in this group I have found myself thinking about prayer itself a lot more often, which has in turn led me to pray on a much more regular basis throughout my day. Now, rather than thinking of prayer as a meal time or morning and evening practice, I have begun to emphasize “praying continuously” as Paul emphasizes in 1 Thessalonians. That is probably the biggest change I have noticed that I have started doing. Talking to God while walking to class, driving, while in class, etc. have all become more meaningful. I have also begun to create a list of prayer requests and pray them somewhat regularly, rather than just praying off the top of my head. Being more specific and intentional in my prayer. The way I pray has not changed much, but I do find myself being more intentional in prayer now and valuing it more than in the past. My prayers have become more structured and meaningful as a result of being in this group because I have a much deeper understanding of what prayer is and why it is so important.²⁵¹

I have strategically placed items and pictures around home and work as prompts to pray for those people. And I am reading scripture more often and reading it differently than I have before. Meditating on the word. Learning more about his heart. The way in which I pray has not changed very much. I do however find myself praying slower if that makes any sense, more thoughtfully. My emphasis being thinking and pondering how to pray that for the kingdom to reign. Asking the question God what do you want? Declaring his attributes in the midst of need.²⁵²

In spite of these mostly positive comments, I believe it is important to consider context for future use of this material. A better context in which to use this material may be in existing

²⁴⁹ P1, email message to author, February 7, 2020.

²⁵⁰ P4, email message to author, February 8, 2020.

²⁵¹ P2, email message to author, February 8, 2020.

²⁵² P5, email message to author, February 10, 2020.

groups that will continue to meet beyond the length of the study itself. Thus, the things that group members learn through the study might become part of the community's ongoing life and, through mutual encouragement, they might be drawn deeper into the prayer practices even beyond the formal study.

There was great benefit in having a co-ed, multi-generational group. I had not anticipated the benefit that was readily acknowledged by more than one participant. I am grateful that the Lord put together the group we shared. In the future, if I can determine the make-up of a group to go through this study experience, I would seek to foster this sort of mix.

Unexpected Challenges

There were two unexpected challenges that I faced related to the schedule of discussion topics and handouts. The first challenge was timing the handing out of the Prayer Practice material after particular workbook discussions. Group discussions consisted of reflections upon the materials handed out the previous session. The topics overlapped somewhat due to the desire to have certain workbook discussions completed before practicing the associated prayer practice.

Another unforeseen challenge resulted from providing only verbal, unwritten, instructions to the prayer partners. I intended for the prayer partners to pray for increasingly longer amounts of time together. For future use of this material, I will make more explicit the expectations for the prayer partners and check in regularly to see that the directions are understood. Further, I will build more time and purposeful sharing into the initial prayer partner meetings for getting to know one another. It is difficult to pray for long amounts of time with someone you don't know well. Trust takes time to develop. If the relationships are already formed, it is more likely that people will more swiftly be able to pray together openly.

Overall, this experience has been very positive and encouraging for me. I look forward to revising the workbook materials and using these study materials again in much the same way, though probably with an existing group. I am grateful that the group found this to be as encouraging an experience as I did and I praise God for the time together with these particular participants.

As I consider this study within the larger context of the American church, I am more convinced of the need for Jesus' followers to grow in our practice of prayer. The simple practices presented through this study, in some ways, are rudimentary. The early church devoted itself to prayer (Acts 2:42). The American church does not. People hunger, I hunger, for a growing, meaning-filled, dynamic conversational relationship with God. If we lead them by example and walk with them, the people we shepherd will follow us into rhythms of prayer that will help them mature in relationship with Jesus and equip them to fulfill the commission to which Jesus has called us. Prayer is necessary (Luke 10:2). It is foundational.²⁵³ We must grow as people who pray. We must open our hearts to God so that we might live transformed lives and we must call upon our loving Father on behalf of millions who have yet to hear Jesus' call to discipleship. We must and we can. Through simple steps of faith, through simple practices of prayer, we can. Will we?

²⁵³ A recent study conducted by Grey Matter Research, sponsored by Discipleship.org and Exponential, noted that a key character trait of Level 4 and Level 5 Disciple-Making Churches is weekly fasting and prayer that asks God to empower disciple-making. Discipleship.org, Exponential and Grey Matter Research, *National Study on Disciple Making in USA Churches: High Aspirations Amidst Disappointing Results*, (March 2020), 13-14, accessed March 4, 2020, https://discipleship-org.s3.amazonaws.com/text/ebooks/Final+2020_National_Study_Report.pdf?ck_subscriber_id=115328048.

Will I? This study has stretched me in several ways. Certainly, there has been a lot of reading, writing and data gathering but there have been personal spiritual challenges also. With regard to my own practice of prayer, this study has made me reassess the time I set aside for listening to God's voice through Scripture. It has reminded me of the importance of attending to God through silence and solitude. I have also been confronted anew with the truth of God's delight in his children and challenged to rest in his gracious presence. I was encouraged by the community of the focus group - that others deeply desire to connect with God and grow in practices of relating with him. I learned that others are willing to open themselves up to new activities in safe contexts where others are also willing to be vulnerable. This is something I've experienced in groups of students in a campus ministry context but this was the first experience of this with adults of such varying ages.

This experience has led me to form the first of what I hope will be many Transformation Groups here at FCCC. These groups will focus on growing as disciples who are able to make disciples and prayer will be a central aspect of these groups. I will ask the guys in this first Transformation Group to hold me accountable to a rhythm of regular prayer daily, monthly prayer days and annual spiritual retreats. This rhythm will keep me focused and open to the work of God as I continue serving with the FCCC family. I have been encouraged and challenged.

As I consider this material for potential use by others, I need to note some observations. The nature of this group as part of this project provided a level of intensity that may not be present in all group contexts. Others using this material might find it challenging to include all portions of the group experience that we attempted. The group sessions should prove familiar to those who have been part of groups that required preparation prior to meeting. The prayer practices may be done by those who are committed to do so. The prayer partner experience,

which was a challenge for our group, may be equally or more challenging for a group of people who are not used to that level of vulnerability.

If all parts of this group are implemented, I highly recommend having individual discussions with group members outlining expectations and asking them to sign a covenant agreement. Explicitly inviting that level of involvement at the beginning of the group calls for a deeper level of commitment which helps participants understand that this group may be more intense than what they may have previously experienced. It will also be important, especially when determining prayer partners, that these folks have opportunity to get to know one another and understand the level of trust that is needed to benefit most from that relationship. Making expectations very explicit and not quite as extreme as I've outlined in this study may lead to better success in that experience.

Another consideration is the level of spiritual warfare that takes place anytime the church is called to pray. If others seek to use this material, they should do so recognizing that there are darker forces always present that do not wish for Jesus' followers to grow as praying people. I did not explore the theme of spiritual warfare in this study. It is not because I don't believe that it exists. I wanted to focus our people on a conversational relationship with God through Christ and did not want to distract them from what they could do to put themselves before our heavenly Father. There are, however, powers that work against the church when the church gets serious about prayer and we need to be aware of that and entrust ourselves to God for his protection and guidance when seeking to encourage the church to grow in this practice. Jesus taught us to ask our Father to "deliver us from evil" and we need to be faithful in praying that for ourselves and our brothers and sisters.

The fruit of helping people to grow in their practice of prayer is the fruit that is born in their lives through a deepened intimacy with Christ. As we see people living with a deepened sense of God's presence and his love for them, as we hear of their joy and see their kindness and goodness shared naturally, we recognize that God is at work changing people from the inside out. As our brothers and sisters pray for their friends and family members who do not know Jesus and those people submit to Jesus as Lord, we see the growth of our sisters and brothers as salt and light and we rejoice at the way that the Spirit adds to the church daily those who are being saved. The fruit of deepened intimacy is also seen as brothers and sisters step from this life to the next with full confidence that God delights to bring his children home. That joyful crossing is the ultimate fruit of faith-filled prayers turned to sight enlightened by the presence of God with his people. Seeing the church be the church, bringing others to Jesus, delighting in God's presence and being faithful to death, this is the ultimate fruit in helping people grow in the practice of prayer. That's a challenge worth accepting.

If you, dear reader, have made it this far, I hope that you're encouraged and challenged too. What will you do with this material for the future? I encourage you to take what is helpful. Use this material as is or reformat it so that it's useful in your context. You might just pull together a couple of people to pray weekly, without using this material at all. That would be a great win as far as I'm concerned. Pray that God's kingdom come and be established in you and through you in the midst of others so that God's glory might be made evident. Pray that your conversational relationship with him grows. Pray for that one person you know that hasn't yet said yes to Jesus. Pray. Then listen to God's voice guiding you to your next steps and do those. Let's pray. Let's keep the conversation going.

APPENDIX A
WORKBOOK SESSIONS

Session 1: Introduction to the group experience – 8/28/19

Welcome to this season of growth together as we explore the practice of prayer. I hope that as we spend time praying (individually and together) we will grow in this important spiritual discipline. However, I hope that our primary growth is in conversational relationship with God through Christ. There are times when we may view prayer as a signal we send up to a far-away, passive God (or a signal we try to hear from this transcendent Being). We send or receive that signal from a dark, lonely world hoping somehow to get God to act or maybe to enable ourselves to hold on until we get to live where God is. At least one of the challenges of prayer is that it can seem that God is so far away and separated from us. Then we consider Jesus.

As followers of Jesus, we seek to be conformed to the image of Christ because it is only in Christ that we have real, full, eternal life.²⁵⁴ Submitting to Jesus as Lord requires that we live by his teaching *and* his manner of life because we have come to believe that he has revealed God and, in his day-to-day earthly existence, how to live a truly human life. He taught us to seek first, above all else, God’s reign and righteousness in our lives (Matthew 6:33). He taught us to pray for God’s kingdom²⁵⁵ to come and his will to be done on earth, *right now*, just as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). To pursue God’s kingdom rule in life and in the world *now* is a primary purpose of Jesus’ disciples; individually and as a community. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah (King), the Lord of all. Therefore, we pursue and seek to extend the good reign of God throughout all creation and we do this empowered by the Holy Spirit, God’s immediate presence and power in us. In Jesus, the powers of the age to come have come near and they enable us, as his disciples, to live truly²⁵⁶ human lives to God’s glory. One author has stated it this way, “Our great longing and prayer, in other words is not to ‘go to heaven’ but for heaven to come down and transform the earth and all its inhabitants and thus reveal the glory and purposes of God (see Revelation 21).”²⁵⁷ Therefore, the God who may seem far away, from time to time, is near and

²⁵⁴ In this sentence, the term “eternal” refers not simply to a quantity of existence but to the quality of existence (see 1 John 5:11-13).

²⁵⁵ Whenever we see the phrase “kingdom of God” in the New Testament (or “kingdom” as in this prayer or “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew), it is not so much referring to a geographic region as it is the reign or rule of God. Where God is ruling, there is his kingdom. Jesus’ emphasis in this prayer is that God would freely reign on earth (and in the one praying this prayer) as he does in heaven.

²⁵⁶ “Righteously” (meaning “rightly”) is probably a better term to use here because of its presence in Matthew 6:33. However, it has come to imply something negative so I have opted for the term “truly.”

²⁵⁷ Gordon T. Smith, *Teach Us To Pray* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 4.

the reality of the age to come has already begun, for God has broken into earthly history in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

God will accomplish his purposes. He will ultimately establish his reign. At the name of Jesus every knee *will* bow and every tongue *will* confess that he is Lord to the glory of God (Philippians 2:11). For now, he patiently but earnestly desires everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). He desires us to live in fellowship with him under his reign. As we grow in relationship with him, we begin to see the world differently. God is not far away but is present with us. As we pray and learn to live as Jesus lived, we experience God's purposes in our lives in new ways. Smith notes,

That is, in our prayer our vision of the kingdom purposes of God will be deepened and broadened; we will be drawn into the reality of Christ risen and now on the throne of the universe. And thus through our prayers we not only pray for the kingdom but also come to increasingly live within the kingdom, under the reign of Christ.²⁵⁸

Living under Christ's reign, we realize that God is not so far away. God's presence is with us and in us. We become the instruments through which God continues his purposes in the world; we become agents of these purposes. Prayer becomes the pathway by which God continues to shape us to carry out his purposes in and through us. As we pray, we realize that God is always at work. He is at work *in* us conforming us to the image of Christ. He is at work in the world *through* us to bring about his kingdom. Prayer is a vital communication and communion pathway by which God's kingdom purposes are accomplished.

²⁵⁸ Smith, *Teach Us*, 11.

Session 2: Why and to whom do we pray? -- 9/4/19

What is prayer?

At its most basic level, prayer is conversation with God. It involves communicating our hearts to God and listening for God's voice speaking his heart back to us. It results in communion with God: intimate fellowship and rapport. Prayer is central to a healthy relationship with God. Dallas Willard notes,

Prayer is conversing, communicating with God. When we pray we talk to God, aloud or within our thoughts. In the nature of the case, prayer almost always involves other disciplines and spiritual activities if it is to go well, especially study, meditation, and worship, and often solitude and fasting as well.²⁵⁹

Why do we pray?

One reason why we might pray is because Jesus prayed. Prayer was central to his earthly life and ministry. He spent 40 days prior to his public ministry in solitude being tempted by Satan during which Jesus likely spent a significant amount of time praying. He frequently spent time alone praying (Luke 5:16, 6:12; Mark 1:35). His disciples asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). People brought little children to him for his blessing and his prayers for them (Matthew 19:13). At the end of his life, he prayed in Gethsemane for himself and for his current and future followers (John 17:1, 6, 20). From the cross, Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who executed him (Luke 23:34-35). Jesus prayed. In fact, his life was framed by prayer.

For Jesus it seems that prayer was as necessary as breathing. As Jesus' disciples, apprentices of his life and ministry, prayer should be as important to us as it was to our Master.²⁶⁰ He not only provided an example of someone who prayed but Jesus taught his disciples how to pray (Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 11:2-4). With both his example and his teaching how to pray, why is it so hard to pray?

Prayer is weird. Let's just admit that. In our world, communication with people is difficult. Communication is fraught with static that garbles the signals and what is received and decoded by the receiver is often not the intent of the sender. There are various contributors to the static: language differences, cultural differences, gender differences, socio-economic differences, political differences, racial differences and generational differences. These and other differences contribute to certain assumptions that make communicating across these differences a challenge and they require particular skills to overcome the differences. In addition to these differences the sender's or receiver's life experiences, or even emotional experiences in the moment of

²⁵⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 184.

²⁶⁰ By using the past tense, I neither mean to imply that Jesus is no longer alive nor still interceding with the Father (cf. Romans 8:34). Rather, I am using Jesus' incarnate earthly life as an example for our own.

communication, and the difficulty in deciphering body language cues create further challenges to understanding one another. If communication with another human person is challenging for us, no wonder communicating with an unseen person proves so bewildering.

God is unseen. He is Spirit. God's words do not typically come to us in audible tones by which we can hear his intonation or volume in order to discern any meaning clues. God doesn't tap us on the shoulder or slap us in the face or pat us on the back as may happen in some human interactions. We cannot see his face when we speak to him to know whether he is sleeping or intensely interested in what we are trying to communicate. Is he smiling or frowning? How can you tell? A person's response to such impossible questions reveals more about a person's faith than the reality of God's actual response (can Spirit smile?).

We know we should pray. Not only is it following Jesus' example but our own experiences confirm that God does hear and respond. He is the loving Father known and revealed by Jesus to us. However, too often our growth as people of prayer is stunted. Perhaps we have been taught, by word or example, that prayer is primarily asking God for things. As an infant cries for food or to have its diaper changed, we get caught in a selfish stage of believing that God is to respond to our wants and needs on our time table. A self-centered approach to prayer will not foster growth once the requests (demands?) are not met. Just as there is a need for a baby to grow into adulthood, there is equally a need for Jesus' disciples to mature in our understanding and practice of this vital spiritual skill.

As we continue to consider why we pray, we might insert this question: why do we communicate with anyone? We are wired for connection. In spite of all of the challenges, we desperately need to connect with other people. We need community. Communication is vital to the formation and maintenance of relationships.²⁶¹ We need relationships to grow, and we need to learn to communicate in order to form, nurture and grow in relationships.

Growing in conversational relationship with God is the primary reason we pray. However, the *act* of praying is not an end in itself. Rather, prayer is the *means* of growing in relationship with God. We pray to experience God. Through prayer we commune with the Giver and Sustainer of our lives. We become more attuned to his voice. We enjoy and rest in his presence and bask in his love. We pray to put ourselves in God's pathway that he might change us and align us with his will, his Word and his purposes.

Dallas Willard wrote extensively about spiritual formation and living as citizens of God's present reign in the lives of disciples. This extended quote is important as we begin to consider the place and purpose of various spiritual disciplines.

But more than anything—and most important for our goal of understanding the disciplines for the spiritual life—we must recognize that Jesus *was* a master of life in the spirit. He showed us that spiritual strength is not manifested by great and extensive

²⁶¹ See for example, Joann P. Niffenegger & Lynda R. Willer, "Friendship Behaviors During Early Childhood and Beyond," *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1998, preview accessed 8/15/19, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1022903329637>.

practice of the spiritual disciplines, *but by little need to practice them and still maintain full spiritual life*. To have misunderstood this point was the fundamental and devastating error of Christian asceticism in the Western church from the desert fathers up to the time of the Reformation. Yet when we look closely and continually at Jesus, we do not lose sight of this one fundamental, crucial point—the activities constituting the disciplines *have no value in themselves*. The aim and substance of spiritual life is not fasting, prayer, hymn singing, frugal living, and so forth. Rather, it is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence where we are placed. The spiritually advanced person is not the one who engages in lots and lots of disciplines, any more than the good child is the one who receives lots and lots of instruction or punishment.

People who think that they are spiritually superior *because* they make a practice of a discipline such as fasting or silence or frugality are entirely missing the point. The need for extensive practice of a given discipline is an indication of our *weakness*, not our strength. We can even lay it down as a rule of thumb that if it is *easy* for us to engage in a certain discipline, we probably don't need to practice it. The disciplines we need to practice are precisely the ones we are *not* “good at” and hence do not enjoy.²⁶²

Therefore, if you feel like prayer is a challenge, that's okay. Communication is hard work but being known and knowing others is worth it. Knowing God and spending time in his presence is worth it. Don't worry about feeling like you are constantly restarting your prayer life or you feel like you're in the kiddie pool of prayer. 20th Century monk, Thomas Merton, once wrote about feeling like a beginner at prayer, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners, all our life!”²⁶³ So let's begin and there's no place better to begin than with God himself.

How do you picture God?

It is God with whom we interact when we pray. The way we picture God plays a significant role in the way in which we interact with him. Someone once asked me to describe God. After I did the best I could, he told me that our understanding of who God is and what he's like affects the way in which we pray to, worship and even feel about him. He said something like, “The God we picture, the way we imagine God to be, has a huge impact on our feelings about God and what we think he might feel about us.” This has proven true in my experience. If I picture God to be someone who counts sins and is waiting to pounce on me once I have met a “failure threshold,” I may hesitate to come to him freely. I may fear him and be in a constant state of despondency, self-loathing and doubt. If I picture God as my “buddy,” I may want to hang out with him but may take his greatness, holiness and righteousness for granted.

Who has he revealed himself to be? Please read through the following verses and fill in the blank regarding what they reveal about God.

²⁶² Willard, *Spirit*, 137-138.

²⁶³ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1969), 37.

- God is
 - _____ (Gen 1:1; Eccl. 12:1; Is. 40:28, 42:5; and Rev. 4:11)
 - _____ (Lev. 19:2; Is 6:1-5; Rev. 4:8)
 - _____ (Ezra 9:15; Ps 7:11; Ps 116:5; Dan 9:14)
 - _____ (Dt. 32:4; Ps 50:6; Is 30:18; 2 Thess. 1:6; 1 Jn 1:9)
 - _____ (Gen 18:25; Judges 11:27; Ps. 58:11; 75:7)
 - _____ (Mark 10:18)
 - _____ (Ps. 68:5; 89:26; Matt 6:9; Jn 6:46; 20:17; 1 Cor. 1:3)
 - _____ (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6)
 - _____ (Dt. 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; Joel 2:13; John 3:16; 1 John 4:8)
 - _____ (John 4:24)
 - _____ (Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:5; Dan. 9:9; Eph. 4:32)

- Read the following passages and list what it is that turns God away from relationship
 - Amos 5 – _____
 - Isaiah 1:1-28 – _____
 - Isaiah 59:1-2 – _____
 - Matthew 6:15 – _____

- What do we see of God in Jesus?
 - Col. 1:15-20 – _____
 - John 5:36-40 – _____
 - John 14:8-11 – _____
 - Phil. 2:5-11 – _____

As we continue to think about, discuss and practice prayer, it is vital that we begin with an accurate picture of who God has revealed himself to be and what his will is for humans and especially for Jesus followers. We see the picture of the best human and his relationship with God in Jesus. There are many more scriptures about God's being and will. The above are just a sampling but remind us that we need to continue to consider God's self-revelation in Scripture and ultimately in Christ himself as we approach him in prayer.

RESPONSES FOR ABOVE²⁶⁴

- God is
 - Creator (Gen 1:1; Eccl. 12:1; Is. 40:28, 42:5; and Rev. 4:11)
 - Holy (Lev. 19:2; Is 6:1-5; Rev. 4:8)
 - Righteous, judge, compassionate (Ezra 9:15; Ps 7:11; Ps 116:5; Dan 9:14)
 - Just, upright, faithful (Dt. 32:4; Ps 50:6; Is 30:18; 2 Thess. 1:6; 1 Jn 1:9)
 - Judge (Gen 18:25; Judges 11:27; Ps. 58:11; 75:7)
 - Good (Mark 10:18)
 - Father (Ps. 68:5; 89:26; Matt 6:9; Jn 6:46; 20:17; 1 Cor. 1:3)
 - Abba Father (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6)
 - Love, covenant keeper (Dt. 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; Joel 2:13; John 3:16; 1 John 4:8)
 - Spirit (John 4:24)
 - Forgiving, compassionate (Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:5; Dan. 9:9; Eph. 4:32)

- Read the following passages and list what it is that turns God away from relationship
 - Amos 5 – Injustice, trampling and taxing the poor, taking advantage of others
 - Isaiah 1:1-28 – Evil deeds, oppression, disobedience
 - Isaiah 59:1-2 – Sin,
 - Matthew 6:15 – Unforgiveness

- What do we see of God in Jesus?
 - Col. 1:15-20 – Image of the invisible God, fullness of deity, head of the church
 - John 5:36-40 – One sent by the Father, One to whom the Scriptures point
 - John 14:8-11 – We see the Father in Jesus, through Jesus, Seeing Jesus is seeing Father
 - Phil. 2:5-11 – Very nature – God, who emptied self, at whose name all will bow

²⁶⁴ These responses were not provided for the group members as part of the received materials.

Session 3: Communicating with the Father who is Unseen – 9/11/19

We have discussed that God is not some far-off, unknowable, impersonal being but One who has come near and has made himself known personally in and through the revelation of Jesus Christ. We see who God is most clearly in Jesus; his character, demeanor, teaching and concerns.

However, God is still the unseen Father (Matt. 6:5-6). While Jesus was indeed on the earth in flesh and blood and completely visible and tangible to his family and friends, he is now in the heavenly realms and, for us, is also unseen. We are given the Holy Spirit to be our guide, teacher, comforter (John 14 and 16) – the very presence of God with us – but he too does his work invisibly. So how do we “connect” with someone who is unseen? How do we communicate with someone whose voice we do not hear?

The writer to the Hebrews notes, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Trust is central to any relationship. Trusting that God exists is necessary for pursuing and growing in relationship with him. Believing that he rewards those who seek after him is a belief that God will extend to the believer the gift of relationship. Faith, therefore, is the starting point for prayer. To pray is to exercise faith. It is to express into the air the belief that there is something else, *someone* else other than the air listening to the words we utter. It is a child-like trust that God exists and that he can hear us and understand our cries.

Prayer as a faith-act is also a “response” to God’s own initiative. He has uttered his Word in Christ and demonstrated through Jesus his love and care. Prayer is thus a response to his initiative, our response to his communication. As Thurston notes,

The impulse to pray is, itself, a result of Divine initiative. God formed us and breathed a Divine Spirit into us to give us life. In baptism Christians were “marked as God’s own forever,” and our impulse is, always, quite rightly, to “return to the source.” We were made by God for God. As St. Augustine said, our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. Our most profound prayer is to turn our whole being, our hearts and minds and souls and strength, lovingly and attentively to God. This quiet and focused attention to God-with-us is profoundly Christian prayer. How ever we “do it,” that turning attentively to God is the sort of prayer that transforms, indeed, reforms us in the image in which we were made.²⁶⁵

Such re-formation by an unseen God is a mysterious work but it is a work that is done in cooperation with each of us. We are part of a conversational relationship with God and, though it is at times hard to track, it is possible. Trusting that God is equally involved in this conversation is key.

²⁶⁵ Bonnie Thurston, *For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 22-23.

In some circles, discussions of faith in regards to prayer go beyond believing that God exists, that he is engaged with us and that he freely rewards the diligent seeker. There is an attempt to connect the response of God to the faith of the person praying. Such explanations have, at times, leaned too heavily on our ability to believe and expunge doubts from our minds and hearts. Some have said that the reason that some requests are not fulfilled, as desired, is because the one asking does not believe enough or correctly. Or there may be some other hindrance preventing the system of prayer from working in favor of the supplicant.²⁶⁶ There is, the argument might go, scripture that states, “But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:6-7). Jesus himself states,

“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:22-24).

One such author has stated,

The man who has confidence in God is very difficult to defeat. He knows, regardless of what comes, he can pray and God will move in his behalf. The key then, to success in prayer, is expecting results...Faith causes you to receive from God. The believer who is operating in faith believes God’s power went to work the moment he prayed.²⁶⁷

Elsewhere, he outlines how the principles that he identifies will bring about the “desired” result for the one praying.²⁶⁸ Further, he states, “Only doubt and unbelief will stop it from operating in your behalf. When you plant the Word concerning healing in your heart, you will produce a harvest of healing—if doubt and fear do not enter and ruin your crop.”²⁶⁹ Doubt, fear, lack of persistent faith and unforgiveness all may “ruin the whole prayer system”²⁷⁰ and thus result in the lack of desired or successful result. Such focus on *me* achieving *my* desired results by using the *system* of prayer correctly, shifts the focus of prayer’s purpose away from relationship with God toward precisely working the system to get what I desire.

Expecting that our Good Father God desires to provide us with good gifts (Matthew 7:11) and the fact that doubt can damage our prayer life *are* important but must also be understood in

²⁶⁶ Such as unconfessed sin, not spending enough time in the Word, or not speaking the correct promise.

²⁶⁷ Kenneth Copeland, *Prayer Your Foundation for Success* (Fort Worth TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1983), 15.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

the light of passages that provide counterpoint to the belief that God only wants what we want in any given situation. James goes on to teach,

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. (James 4:1-3)

The power of prayer does not rest in the one praying. The affirmative answer does *not* rely upon the perfect alignment of my belief, lack of doubt, lack of fear, appropriate actions, assurance of complete confession of all sin, or finding the correct answer in the Bible to claim. The power of prayer resides solely in the God revealed by Jesus Christ. There is no power in prayer apart from him. He answers prayer. He answers, “yes” and “no” and “wait,” but his primary aim is growing in relationship with his dear children. Prayer is a means by which we grow in relationship with God and by which he molds us into the people he desires us to be. He delights to provide us with the good gift of the Holy Spirit (Cf. Matthew 7:11 & Luke 11:13). He also desires to be the One who holds us in grief and pain. There are things we will learn about being human and even about Jesus himself only through suffering.²⁷¹ Our loving heavenly Father walks with us through all circumstances.

When Elijah feared for his life, God provided food and rest. He also talked Elijah through his complaint and sense of aloneness and ultimately recalled him to service (1 Kings 19:1ff). By some calculations, Elijah's fear and doubt would prevent him from getting his desired results from prayer. God gives Elijah the gift of himself. This came not from Elijah's perfect alignment of the foundation rocks to achieve success. It came by the grace of God. God is the One who acts on Elijah's behalf in the midst of his fear just like he did in response to Elijah's boldness.

Elijah confronted Ahab, the erring people of Israel and four hundred fifty prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-40). In doing so, he proposed a contest to provide proof whether Baal or the LORD was God. The prophets of Baal earnestly prayed to their god ensuring that they were doing everything just right; they cut themselves, danced around their altar, shouted loudly and frantically prophesied (1 Kings 18: 26, 28-29). In the end, however, after all their work to get the system of prayer correct, “...there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention” (1 Kings 18:29b). Elijah rebuilt a simple altar, arranged wood and put the sacrifice on the altar and, after having copious amounts of water poured on the altar, prayed, “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again” (1 Kings 18:36b-37).

A simple prayer. Uttered once. The goal of this prayer was to demonstrate who was truly God and to draw God's people back to him in relationship. God responded dramatically.

²⁷¹ We will explore this further in a later session.

We learn that the power of prayer lies not in the earnest, meticulous operation of a system. Instead, we learn that the power of prayer rests in God not in the person praying. God responds to Elijah whether he was bold or afraid. God's answer was not in response to Elijah perfectly manipulating a prayer system but because of God's own graciousness and care for his child.

Faith is important to practice of prayer. However, the focus of attention is not the person who believes but upon the God in whom the person believes. Believing that God still cares about his children, including us, is fundamental to the life of prayer.

The challenge still remains: how might we discern God's response to our prayer? Sometimes it is easy to see how God responds to our prayers. Elijah prayed for it to stop raining and it did. He prayed for it to rain again and it did.²⁷² It is easy to see the positive responses to prayer. We might have prayed for someone who is sick and they became well. Perhaps you have prayed for wisdom in a particular situation after which you realize that things went much better than you anticipated, and you realize that God was somehow mysteriously at work in your circumstances and in you. I know of one woman who was a devout Muslim, Anna.²⁷³ She prayed asking to know that the God revealed by Jesus was real and true. One Sunday when she was in a Christian worship service with a friend, she prayed those very words silently. She then got up to go to the restroom. A woman who was leading worship put down her microphone in the midst of a song and went out to the hallway to find Anna. Upon finding her, the worship leader said, "Sister, the Lord understands what you're going through and he just wants you to know that he is real and true." Having not spoken those words out loud, Anna knew that there was no way anyone would know what she prayed. She realized at that moment that she was dealing with a living God.²⁷⁴ Such a clear response is dramatic and obvious but we do not commonly receive such dramatic, affirmative responses to our prayers. At least, I do not.

What are we to make of prayers we have prayed for years with apparently no response? How do we know when God's response is negative or "Not yet"? This requires persistent listening, wise counsel, careful consideration of Scripture and ongoing dialogue with God. Even then, we may not know with any significant degree of certainty. Living by faith and not by sight is a challenge (2 Cor. 5:7) but it is the life to which we are called; to live trusting that God knows our circumstances and cares. This process is complicated by our American need for immediate service. We do not like to wait. However, there are times when all we can do is wait trusting that God loves us, hears us, and he is intensely interested in walking with us through all life's circumstances.

Consider, for instance, Abraham. He is indeed the father of those who believe (Romans 4). He was called by God to leave his homeland. He did. In conversation with God, Abram was

²⁷² Note, however, that there was some time in between his prayer for rain and the response (1 Kings 18:41-45).

²⁷³ Anna is not her actual name.

²⁷⁴ This story was conveyed to me by Anna when she told me about her conversion.

promised a child, his own flesh and blood (Genesis 15:4). His wife, Sarai, however, was barren so she suggested that a family might come through her servant. When he was eighty-six years old, having lived in Canaan for ten years, Abram became Ishmael's father by Hagar, Sarai's servant (Genesis 16:3, 16). When Abram was ninety-nine, God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah and revealed to Abraham that it was not through Ishmael but through Sarah's child, Isaac, that his covenant would be established (Genesis 17:19). The point of this brief narration of this much longer story is to note that the length of time between God's initial promise that Abraham would have a child and the actual birth of Isaac was more than twenty years.

Discerning the way in which God has or may answer certain prayers is a process. There has been much written about discernment but here let's just consider a few principles that pertain to prayer so that we might keep them in mind as steps toward discerning God's response to our prayers.²⁷⁵ The discernment process involves ongoing dialogue with God individually and in the context of the Christian community seeking to live under God's reign led by the Holy Spirit. It requires seeking God's direction with a humble heart expecting to receive a response from God while wanting to accept what God decides more than what we might want as an outcome. God's response will always be consistent with his revealed word in Scripture. His answer will not contradict Scripture, and his answers, in our historical context, will be in line with Scripture. God's response will always glorify Jesus Christ in the life of the person praying and will typically result in conforming the praying person more to the image of Christ. Again, it may take years to see God's response to certain prayer requests. However, we can trust that God's desire is for us to grow in relationship with him relying upon his love for us and goodness to us.

Prayer is communicating with our unseen Father and it always involves faith. It also requires us to discern carefully his response realizing that, at times, that response may leave us in an uncertain quandary that always thrusts us back into his arms.

(Practice: Lectio Divina handout, given 9/4/19, 2 – 3 times)

²⁷⁵ St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote out a process for discernment in his Spiritual Exercises originally intended for monks but very useful for anyone. More contemporary books continue to carry on the dialogue about discernment including: Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012) and / or Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

Session 4: Prayer models — benefits and challenges – 9/18/19

There are many ways to pray. We pray extemporaneously asking God whatever is on our hearts at the moment. We might pray prayers that we memorized when young. One classic prayer I prayed as a child was, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”²⁷⁶ Even if my parents did not, comedians have found these particular lines humorous because of their frightening nature.²⁷⁷ We also may use acronyms to recall or organize particular aspects of prayer.

There are many such acronyms that might be used. Perhaps the most popular or familiar is ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication). Adoration is praise; recognizing who God is and seeking to ascribe to him the praise and worship due him. He is worthy of praise and honor because of his character, his work in history and on our behalf in Christ and his sovereignty over us, the world and history itself. To praise God is to acknowledge that he is God, we are not. Confession calls to mind and states any sin or anything that is contrary to God’s will for us and anything that damages our relationship with God or others. Confessing “clears the air.” It causes us to “come clean” before God acknowledging those things that might hinder our open communion and communication with Him. Confessing sin involves agreeing with God when we have damaged our relationship with him or others. Thanksgiving is a gift that we can give to God who blesses us abundantly with the gift of his presence, his word in the scriptures and in the flesh, in Jesus, as well as the many tangible blessings he provides moment by moment. Thanksgiving is akin to praise but to express thanks is to recognize that God is the Giver and we are the *receivers* of his blessings. To Supplicate is to request. This is the aspect of prayer that includes making requests for others we know (requests received from friends and family), and it includes requests for ourselves and on behalf of the world – for strife in the world, for circumstances of poverty and pain due to economic or climatic events and political and other leaders around the planet.

A few examples from the Psalms may be helpful.

Adoration

- “I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High.” (Psalm 7:17b)
- “Sing the praises of the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done.” (Psalm 9:11)
- “The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Savior! (Psalm 18:46)
- “Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain.” (Psalm 48:1)
- “Sing to God, sing in praise of his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; rejoice before him—his name is the LORD.” (Psalm 68:4)

²⁷⁶ The origin of this prayer is uncertain but was apparently first found in print in the 1700s in the New England Primer.

²⁷⁷ Tim Hawkins, for example, has a particularly scary memory(?) or rendition of this prayer. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcsPhK9pEYE>.

- “For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.” (Psalm 96:4)
- “Praise the LORD, my soul. LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty.” (Psalm 104:1)
- “Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done.” (Psalm 105:1)

Confession

- “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin.” (Psalm 32:5)
- “For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me. I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin” (Psalm 38:17-18). See the entire psalm as well.
- Psalm 51. The entire psalm. Here’s a portion: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.” (51:1-3)

Thanksgiving

- “I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High” (Psalm 7:17). See here the close association of thanks and praise.
- “Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.” (Psalm 95:2)
- “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.” (Psalm 100:4)
- “Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.” (Psalm 106:1)
- Psalms 107, 118, 136

Supplication

- “Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.” (Psalm 4:1)
- “I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.” (Psalm 17:6)
- “Save me, O God, by your name; vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth.” (Psalm 54:1-2)
- “LORD, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief. ... Rescue me from my enemies, LORD, for I hide myself in you. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground. For your name’s sake, LORD, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble.” (Psalm 143:1, 9-11)

Other examples of acronym prayers include: ACT UP (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Uplift others, Petitions for self). In this prayer format the previous “supplication” is divided between others, asking God whom he might want us to encourage, “uplift” and pray for, and then

“petitions” for ourselves. HEART (**H**onoring God with praise, **E**xamine your life, **A**sk for help, **R**equest for others, **T**hank God); PRAY (**P**raise, **R**epent, **A**sk, **Y**ield).²⁷⁸ In the latter, “yield” is intended to encourage a slowing down and listening for God’s voice and becoming more aware and attuned to his presence in the time of prayer. It also connotes a humble attitude of acceptance and obedience of God’s will. As previously noted, there are many such acronyms. These few suffice as examples.

In addition to the use of prayer acronyms, there are prayers that might be used as models throughout scripture. In a future session prayer practice, we will discuss praying scripture during which we will pray specific Biblical prayers for ourselves and others. Here, we will discuss briefly the model prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples typically referred to as the Lord’s Prayer.²⁷⁹

There are many volumes written about the prayer Jesus gave to his disciples in Matthew 6 and Luke 11. The recordings of this prayer differ slightly.

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.”
(Matthew 6:9-13)²⁸⁰

“Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins
against us.
And lead us not into temptation.”
(Luke 11:2-4)

²⁷⁸ These latter two examples come from Kim Jones, “6 Prayer Models to Spice up Your Prayer Time Plus a Free Printable,” Salvaged Living, accessed August 26, 2019, <https://salvagedliving.com/6-prayer-models-to-spice-up-your-prayer-time-free-printable/>.

²⁷⁹ This prayer has also been referred to as the Disciples’ Prayer or the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

²⁸⁰ Unless otherwise specified, Scripture quotations will be taken from the New International Version.

A full literary analysis and comparison is not to our purpose here. We do recognize, however, that with regard to the body of the prayer provided above, each is found in the context of further teaching about prayer. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus contrasts the praying of hypocrites and pagans with the way he desires his disciples to pray (Matthew 6:5-8) and then concludes with further teaching about forgiveness (6:14-15). In Luke, after he had been praying, Jesus' disciples ask him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1) and then he follows with further teaching about persistence and the goodness of "your Father in heaven" (Luke 11:5-13). While the further teaching about prayer is very important for our further discussion, for the purpose of our discussion regarding this prayer as a model, we will focus on the body of the prayer found in Matthew.

"Our Father." The prayer begins by acknowledging two relationships. First, we see that Jesus teaches us that whenever we pray, we do so as part of or in a community. He begins, "Our Father" not "My Father." We could argue that he does this simply because he's talking to a group; his disciples. However, we need to consider the fact that Jesus did not call just one disciple but a group of people to follow him. He could have established his disciple making movement in one-on-one settings but he did not. He called a community of disciples around him. We see this community in different "sizes" throughout the Gospels. Jesus taught crowds (Matthew 5:1; Luke 9:10-11) and he identified twelve designating them as Apostles that they might be with him and so that he could send them out to preach and drive out demons (Mark 3:14-15; Luke 6:12-16). Jesus also sent out a larger group of seventy-two to preach, heal and drive out demons (Luke 10:1-12, 16-17). He also apparently had an inner-circle of disciples that included Peter, James and John (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33). The final band of Jesus' followers that was together after Jesus' resurrection and ascension numbered one hundred twenty (Acts 1:15). When we are called by Jesus, we are called into community and so even this intimate, personal practice of prayer is done with a recognition that we are not alone in our relationship with God. As one author has stated,

Prayer was never meant to be a merely personal exercise with personal benefits, but a discipline that reminds us how we're personally responsible for others. This means that every time we pray, we should actively reject an individualistic mindset. We're not just individuals in relationship with God, but we are part of a community of people who have the same access to God. Prayer is a collective exercise.²⁸¹

Second, Jesus teaches that God is our Father. The community of Jesus' followers have the same Father in heaven. God, as taught about, experienced by and seen in Jesus, is a good Father who loves his children. This is why Jesus initiates this prayer emphasizing this relationship. In this, Jesus is consistent with the heart of God revealed in the Psalms that state, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling" (Ps. 68:5) and "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). We might even venture to suggest that Jesus extends the relationship promised to the Messiah to his followers, "He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior'" (Ps. 89:26). Therefore, we pray as God's children; the messianic people of God. This

²⁸¹ John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 41.

Father sees and rewards what is done in secret (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18), he cares about and provides for his children's basic needs (Matthew 6:25-33) and gives good gifts to them (Matthew 7:11).

“In heaven” reminds us that our Father is beyond our earthly confines. He is in “the heavens” where his authority and power and glory are completely unmediated and uncloaked. There he is the recognized King of glory, the LORD Almighty (Psalm 24:7-10; Isaiah 6:1-5; Revelation 4:8-11). He is in charge and in control. He doesn't need to ask permission for anything. He has all authority to hear and answer the prayers of his children. As Onwuchekwa notes, “There's no court of appeals that can undo the decisions he makes. We have the ear of the most powerful being in and over the universe. He sees all, knows all, directs all.”²⁸²

“Hallowed be your name” is a petition for God's holiness to be established in the mind, heart and life of the one praying as well as in the world in which the petitioner makes this request. God is to be honored and recognized as set apart from others. Onwuchekwa adds,

To pray ‘hallowed be your name’ means being concerned more with the advancement of God's reputation in the world than your own. It's praying that God himself would protect his name from being defamed and obscured, so that people don't accept a wrong picture of him or reject a distorted picture of him.²⁸³

The next two requests, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” unite with the previous request to ensure that the focus of this prayer is on God's will and kingdom purposes *not* upon the individual praying. Too often our prayers focus on what we want. That is not the focus of this prayer nor of Jesus' life. The sort of Messiah that Jesus was recognized that his Father's will was paramount and he did nothing that he didn't see the Father doing (Matthew 26:39; John 5:19). To Jesus this meant that the Father's will, which led Jesus to the cross, was to be fulfilled regardless of the cost to himself. These petitions are God-focused. Guided by attention to God's greatness and authority over the world and over the one praying. We do not find here a selfish prayer of protection or seeking one's own desires for safety and security in the harsh world. We find the bold request to see Father's will and authority reign unhindered. Onwuchekwa states,

We long to see God reign here on earth in the same way he already reigns in heaven. . . . Establishing God's kingdom on earth means displacing lesser kingdoms, which is what churches do through their gospel work. Local churches, after all, are outposts of God's kingdom. So praying that his will would be done means praying that God would continue to establish his gospel work through local churches.²⁸⁴

²⁸² Onwuchekwa, 44.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

Such a prayer leaves us with nothing less than a radical response to live as the sort of children that make such requests reality. The request for our Father to reign here on earth and the commitment to live that out, by the early Christians, is what resulted in persecution from the state. There was only one King and Caesar was not him. Seeking to see and establish God's reign on the earth means that we advocate for his justice and his mercy and his goodness to flow to all peoples on the earth. N. T. Wright warns, "We can only pray this prayer for the church if we are prepared to mean: make us Kingdom-bearers!"²⁸⁵ He goes on to note something I find very compelling and insightful. Wright states,

. . . we who pray that prayer are ourselves bits of earth, lumps of clay. If we really want God's kingdom to come on earth, we should of course expect that the earth in question will include *this* earth, this clay, this present physical body. That means, of course, holiness. It means, of course, sacraments. And, held between holiness and sacraments, it means the *physical* act of prayer.²⁸⁶

We do well to remember that we are made of dust, earth, just like God remembers that we are dust (Genesis 3:19; Psalm 103:14) and a passing breeze (Psalm 78:39). We pray that God's kingdom purposes and will may be accomplished in us and through us as well as upon the rest of the earth.

Having established that our prayers are not to focus on ourselves but solidly on the person and purposes of our Father, Jesus guides us into three petitions for God's care, forgiveness and protection.

"Give us today our daily bread" is a vital reminder that we are children who receive the gift of sustenance from the hand of our Father. Later in this same chapter, Jesus teaches his disciples not to worry about what we might eat or drink or about what we wear. He notes that we are more valuable than the birds of the air which God feeds. This petition is a reminder that God is the source of our provision. We do not produce our own sustenance. We can be lulled into thinking and believing that by our own striving, we produce but in doing so we forget that it is God who gave us capacity to work, provides seeds to plant and water to nourish plants. God's activity is always paramount. In this request, Jesus calls us daily to remember that God is the one who sustains. Jesus "... commands us to pray for our bread daily so that we're reminded that every last gift is from God."²⁸⁷

"And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" is a vital reminder that prayer is connected directly to our daily, moment-by-moment life. We do not pray in a vacuum. We cannot pray for one thing for ourselves and behave toward others in a way that is contrary to that prayer; not if we're Jesus' disciples. Jesus instructs us to pray for forgiveness as a reminder

²⁸⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 19.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸⁷ Onwuchekwa, 57.

that we are daily in need of forgiveness. Just as we need bread to sustain our bodies, we need forgiveness daily to sustain our souls. Daily we rely upon God's grace to forgive for we are animated dust prone to wander from the One who blew into us the breath of life. As an expression of the grace we have received we automatically extend such gracious forgiveness to others. This prayer, as Wright notes,

...commits the pray-er to actions which back up the petition just offered. . . Prayer and life are here locked indissolubly together. And, please note: this *isn't* saying that we do this in order to *earn* God's forgiveness. It's a further statement of our loyalty to Jesus and his Kingdom. Claiming this central blessing of the Kingdom only makes sense if we are living by that same central blessing ourselves.²⁸⁸

“And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one” is a recognition that the decisions we make each day can be for God's good or they may fall into darker paths. Temptation and evil do exist. We could attempt to ignore them as not having any impact upon us. We could think we are able to take them head on and battle against them in our own strength. Both would be foolish and futile. We depend upon the Father to lead us away from temptation and to rescue us from the evil one.

Jesus knows what it is to be led to a place of temptation to battle the evil one (Mark 1:12-13). Having defeated Satan in that forty-day battle in the wilderness, Jesus was again faced with a final climactic challenge in Gethsemane where he prayed for the cup to pass from him (Mark 14:36). Ultimately, Jesus embraces the will of God over against his own desire. In so doing, he makes way for all his followers to follow faithfully after him. He embraced all sin and made a way through the temptations and evil of the world through his own life, death, burial and resurrection. In light of Jesus' victory, we can pray boldly for God's deliverance from temptation and protection from the evil one.

This exploration of the Lord's Prayer is a bit longer than perhaps needed. However, it provides us with the foundation to understand the way in which this prayer may be used as a model. It is totally appropriate for us to pray the prayer in the words provided by Jesus. It may also be helpful to recognize the way in which what Jesus teaches us in the prayer may be adapted as a model for further prayer. We might suggest the following directions from this prayer.

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Our Father | Recognize the two relationships – God and our siblings |
| • in heaven | Consider and understand God's position |
| • hallowed be your name | Words of praise and honor for God |
| • your kingdom come | Pray for God's purposes above our own to be accomplished |
| • your will be done on earth
as it is in heaven | We aren't merely waiting for heaven but pray for God's
glory and purposes to be revealed here now |
| • Daily bread | Requests for provision are appropriate and welcome |
| • Forgive us our debts | Prayers of confession and requests for forgiveness |
| • as we have forgiven | Realize that our prayers are to be reflected in our lives |
| • And lead us not into | Prayers for reliance upon God's leading and deliverance |

²⁸⁸ Wright, 39-40.

temptation but deliver
us from the evil one

are encouraged and made possible because Jesus has gone
before us and cleared the way by defeating the evil one.

Using model prayers, whether acronym prayers or Biblical prayers, presents us with both benefits and challenges. For instance, both offer a way of organizing our prayers so that various aspects of prayer may be included when we pray. They provide us with a way of ensuring that we are doing more than merely presenting a list of requests each time we pray. Such models encourage us to expand our prayers to include praise, worship (even singing), and confession as well as requests for ourselves and others. Biblical prayers, like the Lord's Prayer, also provide particular language beyond what we might normally use. They teach us to pray beyond the boundaries of our own imagination and experience using language beyond our usual vocabulary.²⁸⁹ Biblical prayers, in particular, provide us ways of praying our emotions that we may even feel is inappropriate.²⁹⁰ In doing so these prayers stretch us and provide for us ways of opening our hearts and souls to God that we may not (or could not?) without them. Also, in praying the prayers of scripture and the Lord's Prayer in particular, we may be assured that we are praying in line with the will of God.

Providing prayer with structure is indeed beneficial but model prayers also come with challenges. One challenge might be that the structure provided becomes a cage or too stifling for particular moments of prayer. Some may feel that each time of prayer or moment of prayer must contain all aspects of prayer delineated by the acronym. For some personalities this may produce guilt feelings that a brief prayer of praise or request for help is not "complete" or a "real" prayer due to it lacking all the "elements." I recognize this may border on the obsessive for some of you but for others of you, you know exactly what I mean. Another challenge, especially with Biblical or memorized prayers, is that it is possible to say the words of the prayer without "praying" the words of the prayer. There are times when reciting a prayer does not express one's heart. The heart may not be engaged, the connection with God not experienced because the one praying merely "went through the motions." Praying Biblical prayers requires perhaps an extra effort of concentration and attention that the words, composed by someone else, express, with meaning, the heart-conviction of the one praying them. Such prayers can stretch us beyond our capacity if we are doing more than reading the words of someone else's prayer. No doubt we have each experienced the difference between *reciting* the Lord's Prayer and *praying* the Lord's Prayer.

Using model prayers can be very helpful. If we do not become overcome or overwhelmed by the form and miss the point of prayer, developing a conversational relationship with God, they can be convenient and very beneficial to our growth as people of prayer.

(Practice: S.O.A.P.S. approach handed out 9/11/19)

²⁸⁹ This is also true for printed prayers of others.

²⁹⁰ This will be seen or demonstrated more clearly when we discuss praying the Psalms in a later session.

Session 5: Solitude, Fasting & Prayer – 9/25/19

How are you doing? Really. How are you? A lot of us might respond that we are fine – hoping that the one asking might not probe further. Some of us, in our more honest moments, might admit to being really busy or being worried or being overwhelmed or just tired.

The reality is that we live in a time when there is more information at our finger tips than was available to anyone in past centuries. Our phones have more computing power than was available on the rockets that carried men to the moon. The various technological inventions that have been created since we have been alive dwarf the technologies of previous centuries. Do a simple Google search (think of what I just typed there) and you’ll find a host of articles that describe how technology has affected our world.²⁹¹ All of the technological developments have made an impact on how we answer the initial question. How are you...really?

One author has noted,

A decade or so ago, when our society was on the cusp of many technological breakthroughs that we now take for granted, there was much editorializing about the hope that we could look forward to four-day work weeks and still get the same amount done. That has not happened. In fact, the drivenness of our pace of life has become even more pronounced; rather than working five nine-to-five days a week, we find that technology has made it more difficult to have any boundaries around our working life. Since we can access voicemail, e-mail and the Internet from anywhere, many of us work six or seven days a week. Technology was supposed to help us lead saner lives, but instead it has led us to expect more of ourselves and try to cram more in.²⁹²

As we seek to cram more in, our life becomes more hectic and we find ourselves running around like the proverbial chicken without a head wondering whether we’ll get everything done that we’re supposed to do. So how are we even supposed to answer the question, “How are you?” We can’t stop long enough to answer.

If we add to the mountain of things we’re to accomplish the amount of “noise” that is produced in our culture, answering the question becomes even more complicated. We have various sources of noise available like: radios, TVs, podcasts, movie videos, phone alerts chirping, music on records (yes, people *do* still listen to vinyl), CDs, mp3s, Spotify, and various personal channels on YouTube. While you are in the middle of a meal or the middle of a conversation a text may come to your phone and you have to battle whether you will divert from your meal or conversation to pick up your phone. Then there’s street noise, the sounds of the hustle and bustle of daily life. We are surrounded by noise. Answering the simple question,

²⁹¹ For instance, see Donovan Alexander, “8 Inventions of the 20th Century That Changed the World,” Interesting Engineering, April 29, 2019, accessed September 8, 2019, <https://interestingengineering.com/8-inventions-of-20th-century-that-changed-the-world>.

²⁹² Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 34.

“How are you” becomes very complicated because we sometimes have no idea who we *are* in the midst of the noise. As Tony Jones observes, “Although we are surrounded by the stimuli of music, television, and conversation (both personal and virtual), we often feel disconnected from other people, from God, and, ultimately from ourselves.”²⁹³ Jones goes on to press the point that one reason that people avoid being alone in silence and solitude is that we are afraid to find out who we are without the busyness.

Indeed, this is why many of us avoid silence and solitude—because our self-identities are bound up in our busy-ness. We’re consumed with managing our lives, maintaining friendships, and loving our families. We may be doing all of this in an effort to love God, to do God’s will (or is it to *earn* our salvation?!), but back in the recesses of our minds, we know that if we slow down long enough and become quiet long enough, all these things, tasks, events, and doings will recede in importance. Where then will we find identity?²⁹⁴

In the session two material I quoted Dallas Willard as noting that, “prayer almost always involves other disciplines and spiritual activities if it is to go well, especially study, meditation, and worship, and often solitude and fasting as well.”²⁹⁵ Just like prayer is not possible except as part of a community of people, prayer, as a spiritual discipline, is intertwined with other practices that give it shape and substance.

One challenge to a life of prayer is quieting down. As noted above, it is hard to clear the clutter and the noise from our minds in order to pray with focused attention. This is why solitude and silence have, for centuries, been found to be such helpful companions to prayer. It’s like trying to hear someone on the phone, as Jones illustrates,

Ultimately, we keep silence and solitude so we can listen better – so we can hear what God is saying to us and to our world. It’s like being on the phone with a friend who has something important to tell me. I will move out of the noisy room where the TV is on and the vacuum is running and shut myself in a closet so I can really hear what my friend is saying. That’s the kind of attentive listening silence and solitude engender.²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 41.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁹⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 184.

²⁹⁶ Jones, 40.

Scary alone

However, solitude and silence can be frightening. It can be a fearful thing not to have the music or TV on, to feel completely alone. I recall the first time that I went on a week-day retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, KY.²⁹⁷ I wrote in my journal something about the deafening silence that I was experiencing in just the first hour of my time in the room of the monastery where I stayed. I didn't know whether I could handle a full five days there. Slowly over the course of time, I found the late Trappist monk's words true, "The ears with which one hears the message of the Gospel are hidden in man's heart, and these ears do not hear anything unless they are favored with a certain interior solitude and silence."²⁹⁸ In order to become accustomed to and comfortable with that interior solitude, the practice of external solitude and silence is beneficial; for some of us necessary. Turning off the noise and getting away from the clutter confronts us with the reality of our own souls. There is nothing to hide behind, nothing to *do* to distract us from the cry of our souls for healing and health, nurture and nourishment.

Barton, reflecting upon the importance of turning off the constant noise, interruptions of our technology and distractions of the drivenness of our "productive" lives notes that it cuts us off from experiencing both God and other human beings. It is isolating and more so than we realize.

Because we are experiencing less meaningful human and divine connection, we are emptier relationally, and we try harder and harder to fill that loneliness with even more noise and stimulation. In so doing we lose touch with the quieter and more subtle experiences of God within.

This is a vicious cycle indeed.

Solitude is an opportunity to interrupt this cycle by turning off the noise and stimulation of our lives so that we can hear our loneliness and our longing calling us deeper into the only relationship that can satisfy our longing.²⁹⁹

After a season of ministry, Jesus called for his disciples to get away with him to a solitary place so they could rest (Mark 6:31-32). It didn't happen exactly as planned. Crowds followed and they didn't get much time alone. However, the call by Jesus remains sound and remains the same. It's important to get away in a quiet place and get some rest. This is one of the benefits of solitude. It's vital to pull away from the routine, change the surrounding and the schedule and get away with Jesus for some rest. The hectic nature of our schedules depletes us. Barton suggests, "Most of us are more tired than we know *at the soul level*."³⁰⁰ However, solitude and silence is

²⁹⁷ See <http://www.monks.org/> if interested.

²⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1956), 13.

²⁹⁹ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 36.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

not just about catching up on some needed sleep. It is about making ourselves available to hear God, to rest *in his presence*, to listen *for his voice*.

When we do get away and quiet ourselves, then comes the challenging work of focusing on listening for the voice of God. We allow our souls to come out of hiding and connect afresh with the presence of God, if we are willing to listen. Richard Foster drives home the point that silence must involve listening to God.

Without silence there is no solitude. Though silence sometimes involves the absence of speech it always involves the act of listening. Simply a refrain from talking, without a heart listening to God, is not silence.³⁰¹

Such listening is absolutely vital to the practice of solitude. If we don't quiet ourselves enough to "be still and know that he is God" (Psalm 46:10) we will likely miss his voice, his leading, his presence.

Parker Palmer describes our souls being like wild animals. Sometimes they are hard to find.

The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance.³⁰²

So what?

We realize that our souls are somewhat timid, our schedules are packed, the noise is distracting, we need the presence of God. How do we take steps into solitude and silence when it is so important but so elusive? If that's your question, here are a couple of brief ideas from Foster and others. I will list these without much explanation hoping that they make sense. I will number these but don't believe that they are necessarily chronological (that is that number two can only be done after number one). Use any of these that are helpful. Discard the rest.

1. Do what you can. If you can only carve out fifteen minutes for some quiet, do that. Begin to become accustomed to listening for God.

³⁰¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 86.

³⁰² Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), quoted in Barton, *Rhythms*, 29.

2. Foster suggests we, “take advantage of the ‘little solitudes’ that fill our day.”³⁰³ These may include the time before the family wakes up, the morning coffee, the time caught in traffic, the walk during lunch, the pause before you eat a meal.
3. Schedule it. Create appointments on your calendar for solitude and silence. When asked if you can meet at that time (it will happen), say, “No. Sorry. I already have an appointment at that time.”
4. Discover or create a physical space for quiet. It might be at home. It may be at a park. It may be on the lake. But remember, being alone and just quiet doesn’t mean that you are listening for God’s voice. Don’t forget to listen for him. Take your Bible and a journal and write God a letter about what you desire in relationship with him.
5. Try to serve without words. Do things for people and don’t necessarily explain why or just go an entire day without speaking. See if you can do it.
6. I once heard someone say, Divert Daily, Withdraw Weekly, Abandon Annually. This is often stated with regard to vacations and rest but I think the principle is also good for solitude and silence. Work toward half-day retreats once a month. Perhaps move on to a week-long retreat once a year. I heard of one person who hoped to complete a thirty-day retreat sometime in his lifetime. Make a plan. Work the plan.
7. Once you create the space on the schedule and figure out in what physical space you will be for your time of solitude, make preparations for what will be included and excluded from that time. Take your Bible. Abandon your phone. From there, you decide.

Solitude and silence are typically more welcome to introverts than to extroverts. However, that doesn’t mean that extroverts do not need it. They do. We all do. It allows us to meet our souls and God in unique ways. In the quiet of our hearts with open ears and eyes, we find that God is nearer than we imagined and he has rest for us that we need. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

And Fasting?

As we have considered solitude and silence, we have really been talking about a sort of fasting. In seeking out times for solitude and silence we have really been considering *fasting* from the clutter that fills our lives, the noise and even people around us. Removing ourselves from contexts where we might otherwise be distracted by noise, our to-do list or from other people is very much the same as refraining from food, drink or even technology for the purpose of spending more focused time with the Father.

According to Foster, “In Scripture the normal means of fasting involved abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water.”³⁰⁴ Jesus fasted for forty days during which he was tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2). The text of Luke suggests that Jesus did not eat anything during this time and so it is assumed that he abstained from food but not water. Scripture also records that other people also fasted. Daniel 10 narrates a story of Daniel

³⁰³ Foster, *Celebration*, 93.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

mourning for a period of three weeks during which he fasted from certain things (choice food, meat, wine, and he also used no lotions). This might be considered an example of a “partial fast” in which not all food is forsaken but only particular things. A so-called “absolute fast,” is one during which neither food nor water is consumed. Foster states that such a fast, “...appears to be a desperate measure to meet a dire emergency”³⁰⁵ because the body cannot go without water longer than three days. Therefore, such fasts like that of Moses or Elijah (Deuteronomy 9:9, 1 Kings 19:8) Foster identifies as supernatural absolute fasts of forty days. Such fasts are exceptional and not the norm.

While fasting is often done by an individual and is most appropriately done as a private discipline known only to the one fasting and God (Matthew 6:16-18), there are also corporate or communal fasts described in Scripture. The annual public fast on the day of atonement is noted in Leviticus 23:26-32. Fasts were done in times of dire need direction (2 Chronicles 20:1-4) or repentance (Joel 2:15, Jonah 3:6-9). David sought God’s mercy for his child in the midst of his own repentance after being confronted by Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 12:13-17). This instance shows that fasting does not guarantee that God will give the fasting person what he or she wants. Jesus did not hold his disciples to a strict pattern of fasting that others expected of him and them (Mark 2:18-19, Luke 5:33).³⁰⁶ The early church also fasted in connection with worship (Acts 13:2-3) and received direction from the Lord through this practice.³⁰⁷

Fasting is not a way of manipulating God but rather of putting ourselves into a humble posture of receptivity. Fasting requires that we give up comfort, even something we need, in order to center one’s attention and heart purposefully upon God in prayer. It may serve to place an emphasis on a particular prayer. It punctuates a prayer with an exclamation mark! It designates the serious concern of the one praying. It expresses sorrow and contrition. Fasting, however, may accomplish nothing if it is done with the wrong attitude of heart (Isaiah 58:3-7).

Fasting from food is most common. However, it is also appropriate to consider fasting from technology, shopping, sweets, travel, or certain habits.

Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite—an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. ... Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us. Our small denials of the self show us just how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁵ Foster, *Celebration*, 43.

³⁰⁶ Though Jesus certainly anticipated that they would fast when he was taken from them in Mark 2:20.

³⁰⁷ This is not meant to be a complete examination of fasting in Scripture but suffices as an example of ways in which fasting was practiced.

³⁰⁸ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 220.

Are we really convinced of what Jesus confessed when he quoted the law that man does not live on bread alone (Matthew 4:4, Luke 4:4)? Will we allow the grumbling of an empty stomach to serve as a call to prayer, a demonstration that we will turn our attention away from that physical appetite to the Lord who has revealed himself as the bread of life (John 6:35)? We turn from matters of the physical to matters of the soul. “Fasting reminds us that we care about ‘soul’ things.”³⁰⁹

Calhoun suggests some helpful guidelines for fasting from food that I want to share here.

- Don’t fast when you are sick, traveling, pregnant or nursing. People with diabetes, gout, liver disease, kidney disease, ulcers, hypoglycemia, cancer and blood diseases should not fast.
- Don’t fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Fasting is not magic.
- Listen for a nudging from God to fast.
- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting for one meal. Spend the time with God that you would normally be eating.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don’t attempt prolonged fasts without guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting long periods of fasting.
- If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on days you fast. Adjust your responsibilities appropriately. (Expect your tongue to feel coated, and expect to have bad breath.)
- Begin a fast after supper. Fast until supper the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three, meals.
- Don’t break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer the fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.³¹⁰

Practice: Acronym prayer – Select one of the acronym prayer models discussed 9/18/19 (ACTS, ACT UP, HEART, PRAY) and pray 2-3 times this week using that as a way to organize your prayer time. ALSO – Journal your prayer times in accord with the Journal practice handout.

³⁰⁹ Calhoun, 220.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

*Session 6: Where, with whom and when do we pray? Comfort and discomfort in prayer /
One's own body and Christ's body – 10/2/19*

The Bible states, “The Word became flesh...” (John 1:14a) and we don’t understand that. We don’t know how God fits in the package of a human being. It’s impossible to grasp. How can that which was from the beginning, the rationality behind all creation, the One through whom everything was made (John 1:3), immense as the universe, fit into a human being’s flesh? It is undoubtedly a statement of faith to say that we believe it.

However, the text doesn’t stop there. “The Word became flesh *and* made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14-emphasis added). Eugene Peterson translates the first part as, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14a The Message). The first chapter of John’s Gospel is deep and sets out the theological foundation for the incarnation. Jesus, The Word of God, becomes flesh. He is God-man, man-God. Jesus is fully human and divine at the same time. Jesus didn’t do this to enjoy a few days of walking around just to get to know what it was like to use legs and smell the roses. He didn’t spend a week in the Caribbean, a week in Alaska and a week in Africa to walk through the creation just to sample it, to do a little explore and then return to heaven, hang up his Jesus suit and then become his vastness again. Clearly, we could reflect upon this for volumes (and many have). Just think with me for a minute about Jesus being human; having a body just like we do.

Okay...really. Take a minute and just think about that. Did you do it? Do before you read on.

The reality of being human means that Jesus grew from a baby who soiled diapers and burped and spit up. Jesus toddled around and fell down and probably skinned his knee. Jesus got hot and sweat dripped from him. Jesus’ biological and physiological functions were just like any other first-century Jewish boy’s functions. He got tired and hungry and angry and he laughed and sang and ran. Jesus probably swam in the Sea of Galilee. His feet got stinky and his armpits were probably hairy. His mother probably had to keep telling him to shut the door because he was born in a barn. O.k. maybe not. You get the idea, though, right? Jesus was human and as a human, he experienced everything we do.³¹¹ More than this, Jesus, in his flesh, demonstrated / made evident / put on display the glory of One who was full of grace and truth. He did so in his embodied state. Consider Barton’s thoughts on this,

The incarnation itself—Christ’s choice to take on flesh and inhabit a human body—forever elevates the experience of embodiment to the heights of spiritual significance. Jesus, the supremely spiritual being who has existed for all eternity far beyond the physical, material world as we know it, chose to take the journey into human flesh and to

³¹¹ By using the past tense, I do not mean to infer that Jesus isn’t still human (cf. Romans 8:11, Ephesians 1:20). We do not have the space or bandwidth to discuss the way in which the incarnation is an ongoing experience for the Son of God. However, we may find it a fruitful meditation to consider the possibility that Jesus “made himself nothing,” as the NIV translates Philippians 2:7, as extending further than a thirty-three-year experience.

become limited as we are by space and time. The central sacrament of our faith—the ritual and substance around which all Christians gather—is bread and wine that commemorates Jesus’ life and death in a body made of flesh and blood.³¹²

You may be thinking, “Rich are you o.k.?” Yes. I’m fine. Thanks for asking. The point of this brief ramble is that we often think of prayer as happening on a level of heart or head or soul or the level of the spiritual. When we pray, we are communicating what is in our hearts and our heads and we’re trying to get that to God who is Spirit and unseen and all the things we’ve already discussed. But here’s the thing. We do this communicating as embodied creatures and our bodies actually matter when it comes to prayer. Our bodies are not just part of us, they are us, an integral part of who we are. What our bodies do matters eternally. Even though we tend to think of our bodies as temporary instruments or tents, the reality is that our embodied nature is absolutely central to who we are. This is important because it is actually as embodied beings that we can relate to Jesus. That is, we don’t have to think about what it’s like to be Spirit in order to relate to God. We don’t have to somehow leave our bodies behind and become disembodied in order to commune with our heavenly Father. We can relate to God as embodied beings because he relates to us in this way – by becoming flesh. This enables a line of communication and also suggests that we need to realize several things when it comes to praying as embodied beings. Flowing from these realizations are several things we need to attend to as well.

First, let’s remember that our bodies are a gift to us. God formed our bodies and called them very good (Genesis 2:7, 1:31). In Christ, we are told that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and that we are to honor God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Honoring God involves caring for our bodies appropriately. We should eat well, exercise and rest adequately to establish the wellbeing of our bodies.

It also means that we do not use our bodies to take inordinate pleasure in things contrary to God’s desired design for us. For instance, it is possible to delight in Oreos. There are so many different kinds to enjoy and love and devour! There are apparently twenty-five different kinds for sale. I won’t mention all...o.k. I will. There are Regular Oreos, Double Stuf Oreos, Mega Stuf Oreos, Most Stuf Oreos, Mint Oreos, Birthday Cake Oreos, Oreo Mint Thins, Fudge-Dipped Oreo Thins Bites, Fudge-Dipped Mint Oreo Thins Bites, White Fudge-Dipped Oreo Thins Bites, Oreo Thins Bites, Chocolate Oreos, Chocolate Oreo Thins, Peanut Butter Oreos, Red Velvet Oreos, Chocolate Peanut Butter Pie Oreos, Spring Oreos, Dark Chocolate Oreos, Golden Oreos and Golden Thins, Fudge-Covered Oreos, Carrot Cake Oreos, Oreo Pistachio Thins, and Lemon Oreos.³¹³ What’s not to love? It would be possible to eat Oreos every day, all day and even eat nothing but Oreos and never get tired of the possible combinations. We might dream of Oreos and wonder when the next time was going to be when we could get an Oreo and a glass of

³¹² Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 80-81.

³¹³ There are likely many more flavors in this and other markets but here is a list from, Tess Koman, “We Tried Every Single Oreo Flavor on Shelves. Here’s What Came Out on Top,” *Delish*, March 11, 2019, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://www.delish.com/food-news/g26783387/best-oreo-flavors/>.

milk... Clearly this is a silly rant. That would be obsessive, clearly addictive behavior that is contrary to caring properly for our bodies. It is possible to take excessive pleasure in any appetite in a way that is not in line with God's good design. We are to honor God with our bodies.

Next, part of taking care of our bodies involves being "attuned" to them. Having a sense of what we are feeling in our bodies is part of honoring God's design of us as embodied creatures. Are our shoulders or neck tight or tense? Is our breathing shallow? Are we sitting with poor posture? Are we mindful of the way that stress affects our physical demeanor and body position (and thus has a resultant effect on our mindset or our spirit)? Let's pause.

Take a moment and relax. Sit upright with your feet on the floor, your hands in your lap and your eyes shut. Slowly breathe in to the count of four and out to the count of four. Repeat. Intentionally relax your body by starting at the top of your head. Release the muscles that are in your head and neck. Loosen your shoulders and let your arms release the tension in them. Continue breathing. Relax your chest and let the weight rest on your hips and against the back of the chair. Continue to think down through your entire body, through your pelvis and relax your thighs even your knees and your calves and finally your feet. Breathe in and out and rest in your body. Be aware of what that feels like. Praise God.

While we might think of prayer as an activity that engages us primarily on a soul level, the Scriptures tell us plainly that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and a temple, after all, is a place of prayer and worship. Prayer...is primarily about deepening our intimacy with God. Human desire for God is experienced in the flesh as a visceral longing, a hunger and a thirst, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you" (Psalm 63:1).³¹⁴

Another aspect of praying as embodied creatures has to do with recognizing the way we're "wired" in personality or temperament. Again, there are volumes that explore personality theory and psychology and we don't need to explore all that here. However, it is helpful to note that our personality preferences have an impact on the way in which we relate to God in prayer. Some of us are more introverted others more extroverted. Some like nature and feel closest to God when in the woods. Others of us like music and feel closest to God when listening to hymns or singing praise choruses. There is a story from M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., a former professor at Asbury Seminary, that I appreciate in this regard. I will share it in full (it's a bit long) because I think it's helpful.

A student came to me a few years ago and, after breaking the ice, admitted to me somewhat sheepishly, "My devotional time is the pits. I'm just getting nothing out of it."

I asked, "What are you doing?"

He responded, "Well, I have a quiet place in the apartment where I go and I sit. I try to get silent, I read the Scripture, I pray, and I try to meditate. It's just horrible."

³¹⁴ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 86-87.

Since we have all our students take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as part of their orientation, I inquired about his preference pattern. It turned out that he was an ESFP³¹⁵ with strong sensing-feeling preferences. When I asked him how he had developed this kind of devotional life, he said, “I was taught that if you want to have a good devotional life you go aside by yourself and sit quietly, read your Bible, pray and try to be silent and meditate and listen to God.”

I asked him, “What are some of the times God has truly been alive for you, when God’s presence has been real?”

He replied, “When I am out walking in the woods and hearing the sounds of nature and things like that.” And he went on to describe a pattern of sensing-feeling activities.

I suggested to him that perhaps he should develop a devotional time that would incorporate these kinds of activities. Since he had his devotions early in the morning, I suggested that he go out and walk through the streets of town or in the woods while he prayed, pondered Scripture and fellowshiped with God. When I discovered he had several records or tapes that contained only nature sounds...I proposed that if for some reason he couldn’t go out, he put one of these on and use it as the context for his devotional time. I also suggested that instead of sitting still he might try expressing his prayer and worship of God in body movements, singing hymns and chanting the psalms.

Although he didn’t say it in words, I could see him wondering whether this was appropriate. Could these kinds of activities really be “devotions”? I tried to assure him they were.

A few weeks later the young man returned ecstatic. He had experienced a wonderful renewal of spiritual vitality and a sense of once again being on the pilgrimage toward wholeness in Christ.

What had happened? Some well-intentioned INTJ had laid upon this fellow, in the early stages of his Christian pilgrimage, a purely INTJ devotional life. Such a model of devotion can be rich and fulfilling for an INTJ, but not for an ESFP. It didn’t nurture this kind of person at all. It had become a numbing burden rather than a nurturing blessing.³¹⁶

When and where we pray best is typically connected to the way we’re wired in terms of our preferences. There is no wrong place for you to pray. Select a place where you are most enabled to sense the presence of God. Is that in a special chair in the dark? Great! Is that out walking among people in the mall? Fabulous! Wherever you are able to concentrate on hearing God and you’re able to focus upon God’s voice and presence, go there. Are you a morning

³¹⁵ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 51ff. Mulholland describes the work of Carl Jung and his research identifying four essential preferences that shape the way we relate to the world and process data we receive in the world. Jung organized the four preferences in pairs. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a personality assessment that uses these four pairs of preferences and identifies a person’s personality preferences using the eight categories of preferred attitude, function or lifestyle. These eight include: Extroversion, Introversion, Sensing, N for Intuitive, Thinking, Feeling, Judgment, and Perception.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

person? Meet with God then. Are you a night owl? Include God in your evening and meet with him then. Be aware of your preferences and the times when you feel closest to him and draw near to him in those times and places.

Do you feel that God is closer, more evident, more present when you are with others? Ensure that you have a prayer partner and pray with her or him.³¹⁷ Can you only focus on God when you are alone and isolated from sound? Get yourself some noise muffling headphones and drink deep of God's voice. Praying with others is not more correct or holy than praying in isolation. Nor is praying alone the more righteously appropriate manner to meet with Father. Let's acknowledge the way in which we are made and rejoice in God's creative handiwork.

Regardless of our wiring, however, there will be particular times of praying alone and in community. We are, after all, a part of a praying community of people as Jesus' followers. The community, the Body of Christ, is a school and support of prayer. Introverts and extroverts all learn to pray by praying and especially by hearing others pray. We learn from parents and Sunday School teachers and friends how to approach God. We are lifted up in prayer by our brothers and sisters in Christ and are often carried along by their prayers when we can't pray or find it very difficult to pray. Fellow followers can challenge the way we pray when we pray selfishly. They can do that overtly or by gently correcting our prayers with prayers of their own. We may learn new and deeper ways of praying or perhaps even different prayer "vocabulary" as we pray with Christ's Body that we would never learn on our own. The Body of Christ is essential to a healthy life of prayer. Don't neglect praying with the church.

Finally, our body is used in various ways as we pray. We might bow in prayer or lay flat on the ground prostrate before the Lord. We may break into song or dance a prayer. We may find ourselves weeping in sorrow or laughing in joy. All of these modes of prayer are appropriate and all of them require a body. Let's refer to just a few Psalms as examples.

Psalm 30:5: "For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

Psalm 95:6: "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;"

Psalm 126:2: "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'"

Psalm 126:6: "Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them."

Psalm 138:2: "I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your unfailing love and your faithfulness, for you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame."

Psalm 149:3: "Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp."

³¹⁷ The only caveat I would make is that this person(s) should be a Jesus follower. Not that you can't pray with people who are not Jesus followers (we'll talk more about that during the missional praying session) but when it comes to your growth in Christlikeness, you need a like-minded fellow Jesus follower as a prayer partner.

Certain physical prayer postures may be comfortable. Others may be uncomfortable. There are appropriate times for both. It is possible that praying on our knees is necessary for expressing our heart or our repentance but it might also create pain in our knees. Let's recognize that as part of the repentance and part of our prayer. We do not need to avoid discomfort in our prayer times. Nor does the experience of pain make our prayer more holy.³¹⁸

Our bodies are a gift from our heavenly Father and we can relate best to him as the embodied creatures formed by his hands. We do not need to seek to be disembodied spiritual beings who degrade our fleshly state but rather we are embodied spiritual beings fully enjoying the wonder of God's creation and his own union with flesh in Jesus Christ. We learn what it is to be truly human from the God-man, Jesus. May we rejoice in God's very good gift.

Practice: Fast from a meal twice this week (ensure that your system can manage this – do **NOT** do this if you have health issues that would make this hazardous) **AND** practice the Jesus prayer or one of the other breath prayers described in the handout.

³¹⁸ We have no need purposely to “punish” ourselves or create discomfort as some act of penitence. Self-flagellation, whipping oneself as an act of mortification of the flesh, was practiced in some monasteries in centuries past. It is not appropriate for the follower of the One who has born our sorrows and by whose wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). In the 13th Century, there was a group of Roman Catholics known as the Flagellants. This movement is labeled by the Catholic Encyclopedia as a “heretical epidemic of the later Middle Ages” and I do not recommend the practice as a spiritual discipline. Leslie Toke, "Flagellants" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (New York: Robert Appleton, 1909), accessed September 21, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06089c.htm>.

Session 7: Does he want to hear it? What do we take to God? – 10/9/19

The story is told of a woman who was on a diet but was having a hard time with it. One day she was out running errands and as she was driving, she drove past a donut shop. She prayed that if the Lord wanted her to have a donut, even though it wasn't on her diet, that he should open up a parking space for her right in front of the store. Behold, a parking spot was available for her right in front of the store, on her tenth trip around the block!³¹⁹

Should she have prayed such a prayer? Did God answer it? In a world where millions of people don't have adequate nutrition, is such a prayer appropriate?³²⁰ Does God care about things like parking spaces to indulge a sweet tooth? Does God care about the pie you bake or the sporting event you want to turn out a certain way or whether you win the lottery? On the other hand, is it appropriate to bring to God anger toward others or even toward him? What is it appropriate to take to God in prayer?

Our immediate knee-jerk response is probably, "anything!" However, in the back of our minds, we may still wonder whether we *should* pray certain things or whether it's *right* to do so.

A friend of mine is married to a great woman. They are wonderful, generous, humble, kind and caring friends. They tried for several years to have a family. They went to doctors and clinics but they could not conceive. He was angry. He was angry at the vacuum they felt in their arms and hearts, he was angry that he couldn't make his wife a momma, he was angry with himself and he was angry with God. He mentioned to someone that he was mad at God about all this and that person rebuked him. That person's take on the situation is that God knows best and that he is always right and my friend should repent of his anger with God and get right with him. He then asked me what I thought.

One thing that life teaches us is that it is messy. It is not neat. There are ups and downs and we are often on a roller coaster ride between the two. Life is filled with great joys like birthdays and graduations, marriage, reunions, celebrations of successes and so on. But life is also filled with sorrows like broken relationships, infertility, severe illness and death. Such extremes make up life.

In a previous session, we discussed that God is worthy of praise and adoration and thanksgiving all the time. God is worthy because of his very nature as a Holy, Holy, Holy God. By virtue of his very being he is worthy to receive all glory and honor. He is the Creator of the Universe and no one is greater than he is.

³¹⁹ Bonnie Thurston shares a form of this story in *For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 44.

³²⁰ The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that about 815 million people of the 7.6 billion people in the world, or one in ten, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2016. "How Many People are Hungry in the World," World Hunger Education Service, Hunger Notes, accessed September, 28, 2019, <https://www.worldhunger.org/hunger-quiz/how-many-people-are-hungry-in-the-world/>.

He is also worthy of our praise and our very lives because of all he has done on our behalf to redeem us. He gave his own Son in order to redeem us from our brokenness and to establish us as his children. He was willing to go to such extremes for lumps of earth that he formed from dust that he created and into which he blew air. He loves us intently and has shown us that he is our loving Father. He is worthy of praise because of what he has done for us.

Since God is Holy and worthy of praise because of who he is and what he has already done for us, is it really appropriate to pray about parking spots or our culinary creations? Or do we dare express our anger at the King of the Universe, Creator of all that is? Where do we turn to begin to answer such questions?

One of the first places we can go is to the prayer book of God's people. The Psalms have been "prayed" and sung by God's people for centuries. To this day, monks in various monasteries and others who follow more liturgical approach to devotions, continue to chant and pray the Psalms daily. We turn to the Psalms first because of the variety of prayer that we find there but also because it is there that we find blunt honesty in prayer.

Thomas Merton notes that "the Psalms are the songs of men who *knew who God was*."³²¹ The Psalms contain praise and lament and thanksgiving and confession. As Scripture, they are inspired and as such carry along to us not only the heart of the people of God but something of the heart of God as well. There is revelation expressed in the Psalms. In fact, when we pray the Psalms, we are praying words given by the Holy Spirit. Merton notes, "Nowhere can we be more certain that we are praying with the Holy Spirit than when we pray the Psalms."³²² In the midst of praying the Psalms, we find that they enable us to surrender ourselves to God in the variety of circumstances of our lives.³²³

As mentioned above, the Psalms contain a variety of types of prayer. There are Psalms that tell stories (78, 105), Psalms of Lament (51-also called penitential, 90) and Psalms of thanksgiving (107, 118, 136). There are Psalms of praise (100, 150) and Psalms written for festivals (2, 95).³²⁴ The Psalms express a wide range of emotion. We can find there the shout of praise, "Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth" (Psalm 100:1). There is also the lament of death, "Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Psalm 137:8-9). Such extreme language used in the Psalms seems strange to our ears.

³²¹ Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2014), 3.

³²² *Ibid.*, 11.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

³²⁴ This brief list is merely illustrative of various types of Psalms. It is not exhaustive. These, and various subsets within these categories, are referenced by Bernard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 235-238.

Should the people of God who lift up the Holy God in praise also call for the destruction of infants of their enemies? Especially in light of the revelation of Christ's call to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44), should we let such raw emotion come out?

Inflamed emotional statements are not limited to the Psalms. Job was a righteous man. He was wealthy and had a large family and he was someone of whom God thought highly (Job 1:8). The Adversary, Satan, said that Job's loyalty was tied to God's blessings and that if those blessings were not there, Job would not be such a good man. Job's loyalty, Satan argued, would falter and he would curse God. God allowed Satan to take Job's wealth, his family and eventually his health, striking him with sores from his feet to his head. Job's wife is left with him and she even encourages him to curse God and die (Job 2:9). Three friends come to Job and suggest that there must be some unconfessed sin that Job has committed, some wrong he had done that has led to all this calamity. Job, however, insists that he is an innocent victim, that he has done no wrong. Still he states bluntly his complaint.

“I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I say to God: Do not declare me guilty but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked? Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees? Are your days like those of a mortal or your years like those of a strong man, that you must search out my faults and probe after my sin—though you know that I am not guilty and that no one can rescue me from your hand? Your hands shaped me and made me. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again?... Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me. If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave! Are not my few days almost over? Turn away from me so I can have a moment's joy before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and utter darkness...” (Job 10:1-9, 18-21).

In all this, God never reveals to Job that he did not bring upon Job the horrors that Job experienced. The buck ultimately stops at God's desk having allowed Satan to attack Job in this way. However, God does not justify himself to Job at any point along the way. He also does not condemn Job for his words. He does confront Job and addresses some of Job's presumptions and reminds Job who is in charge but God does not forsake their friendship. In fact, God justifies Job to the three friends who gave the classic wisdom understanding of blessing and cursing.³²⁵

“I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. So now...go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering

³²⁵ In grossly abbreviated form, the classic wisdom approach to blessing and curse is: If you do right, you will be blessed. If you do wrong or are wicked, you will be cursed. In general, this is the argument of the friends. Job insisted, however, that he had done right but was still afflicted with this curse from God. Much more could be stated about the contrast or dialogue the presence of the book of Job brings to the canon of Wisdom books (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) but that discussion is not to our point here.

for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7b-8).

What do these Scriptures suggest to us as we try to think through what is “appropriate” to bring to God in prayer? Is it wrong for my friend to express his anger with God? Is it a sin for him to admit that he was mad at God? No. I believe that God can take such raw, emotional outburst and that he can walk through the pain with the one(s) hurting. He cares for his children and can navigate past the hurt cries in the midst of our terrors and pain. Both the Psalms and Job show us this.³²⁶

What does this tell us about praying for parking spots? Do these Scriptures address those sorts of prayers? No. Not really. Are such prayers sinful? No. They may be “trivial” but they are likely not sinful. However, we should probably ask ourselves what such prayers suggest about our view of God. Do we view God as a genie whom we seek to provide us with our selfish whims? Or is God the God he has revealed himself to be—Creator, King, Father? In past sessions, we have stated that God delights in us and he delights to commune with us. Isn’t the mundane, ordinary, day-to-day life appropriate to bring to God?

The mundane is certainly appropriate to bring to God in as much as we are shaped by God, through prayer, to want what he wants and it is through prayer that we discover God’s heart is oriented different than is our own. He will receive us no matter the topic of our prayer and he will take us beyond ourselves to grow us up, conforming us to the image of his Son who did and said what he saw and heard from the Father (John 5:19, 12:49-50) ultimately surrendering to the Father’s will (Matthew 26:42).

Practice: Pray for an hour using the Zúme Prayer Cycle at least once this week before our next session.

³²⁶ There are other Scriptures that point to this truth as well (e.g., the cry and complaint of Jeremiah found in Jeremiah 20:7-18).

Session 8: Intercession and Missional Praying – 10/16/19

Have you ever had someone speak up for you? Maybe you were ridiculed or bullied in school and someone took a stand with you. Perhaps you were wrongly accused of something and someone who knew the truth “set the record straight” and you were cleared. Perhaps a co-worker or a supervisor built you up in front of others by talking about your value to the company, your character, integrity and hard work. It’s encouraging and life-giving to be the recipient of such care.

Jesus interceded for others. We established, in the initial sessions, that Jesus prayed often. He spent a lot of time with the Father. Some, we don’t know how much, of that time was spent praying for others. For instance, he prayed regarding whom he should select as Apostles (Luke 6:12). He instructed his Apostles to ask God to send out workers into the harvest field (Luke 10:2). Undoubtedly, he did that himself. He prayed that Peter would not be sifted by Satan (Luke 22:31-32), for his disciples and even for us who believe as a result of the Apostle’s testimony (John 17:9, 15, 20). The writer of the book of Hebrews states that Jesus’ intercessory work as High Priest on behalf of his followers is ongoing.

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (Hebrews 7:23-25)

Beyond Jesus, interceding for others through prayer is something that God accepts and encourages. Consider his instructions to Job’s friends.

So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the Lord told them; and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer. (Job 42:8-9)

This is consistent with Paul’s encouragement to pray for others (including himself):

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Eph. 6:18-20, see also Colossians 4:2-4, 1 Thessalonians 5:25, 1 Timothy 2:1-3)

It also aligns with his own practice of praying for others (see e.g., Romans 1:9-10, Ephesians 1:15-17, Colossians 1:3, 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12). James also encourages prayer for others.

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. (James 5:13-15)

This intercessory aspect of prayer seems consistent with the ministry of Jesus and the first-century church (remember the prayer meeting that was going on when Peter was released and how they were shocked that he had been miraculously freed? See Acts 12:12-17). It also reflects the ongoing intercession on our behalf by the Holy Spirit.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

These Scriptures encourage us to pray for others. In doing so we are reflecting the prayers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the early church. We are encouraged to pray for the sick and for the mission of the gospel to go forward. Just how we do that is something that we are free to explore. There is help in this regard that is provided by a variety of authors. Let's consider a couple of these pointers as we continue to discuss interceding for others.

As we carry out this important ministry of prayer for other Jesus followers and those not yet following Jesus, we need to remember that we do so as an expression of love, a service. Smith notes, "Prayer is an act of service. We serve our neighbor and our world by interceding for the needs of the other."³²⁷ Praying for the needs of others will require some organization on our part. Realize that once people find you actually willing to pray for them, they will be very free to provide you with requests. You will need to determine how you will pray for people. Prayer apps on your phone may be helpful or a prayer list in your journal. Discover what works best for you and use that. You also will need to determine how frequently you will pray for a particular request. Some requests you will no doubt want to pray daily, perhaps hourly, for someone in a dire need. Other requests you may pray for once a week or once a month. Part of this organizational process is being sensitive to the Spirit's lead and part of it is determining what you are able to manage. Be careful not to become a person who says, "I'll pray for you" and then never does. If the only time that you will pray for a need raised to you is in that moment, don't neglect to pray right then and there with the person. Follow the "pray now" rule. You might say to the person making the request, "How about we pray now for this? May I pray with you right now?"

Smith also points to two vitally important things to remember during this service of intercession. First, you are not free to share the requests shared with you unless you have been given direct permission to do so. Keep another's requests in confidence. You must be trustworthy if you are going to carry out the ministry of intercession on behalf of others. Do not betray that trust. Second, your prayers for another do not have to be lengthy. Remember Jesus'

³²⁷ Smith *Teach Us*, 105.

instruction on prayer in Matthew 6. You do not need many words when it comes to praying for oneself or for others.³²⁸

One of the most helpful pieces of advice I have ever heard with regard to praying for others comes from Rich Richardson's book *Experiencing Healing Prayer*. Though the book has much to say about the contemporary ministry of healing, of a variety of wounds, there is a section I think is very helpful for this ministry of intercession. Therefore, I will share these sizeable quotes.

In my early Christian life, my prayers for others consisted of requests for whatever I thought they needed. When I first began to look into the eyes of Jesus and stopped my running monologue in prayer, God was finally able to get a word in edgewise. Paul tells us that Jesus is at God's right hand, interceding for you and me (Romans 8:34)—so I would ask Jesus how he was praying for the people I cared about. For example, I asked Jesus what he most wanted for my friend Bruce, what he was praying for Bruce's life. Immediately I felt a nudge to turn to Philippians 2, which calls us to be like Jesus, who didn't think of himself first but was a servant to all.

I began to pray Philippians 2 for Bruce every day. He was two thousand miles away in Los Angeles, and I had not been in touch with him for a while. Three weeks to the day after I had begun praying Philippians 2 for Bruce, I got a letter from him. He wrote,

I can't seem to get out of Philippians 2 in my Bible reading. Every day God seems to be showing me something else about how to serve others, and especially my wife and my family. What's more, my wife is challenging me with lots of ideas these days about how I can be a better servant. So I guess that's how you can pray for me.

Ha! I was already on the case! I can't tell you what it did for my faith and practice of listening prayer to experience such a concrete example of how to enter into what Jesus was already praying for another's life.³²⁹

Hear that again, "I would ask Jesus how he was praying for the people I cared about." That is an extremely helpful insight. It reminds us of some very important things. We are not alone in praying for the person who brings us a request. Jesus is already praying for that person! Jesus already has something in mind for this person. He is interceding right now as our friend's High Priest *and* we are invited to join Jesus in praying for someone every time someone brings a request for us to pray. That means that we cannot just pray for the request as the person bringing it to us wants us to pray, though that is a significant part of this ministry. Ultimately, Jesus has something in mind and we are his disciples and his ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). Therefore, as his ambassadors, it is vital that we ask him how he is praying for this person and how we might join Him. Gordon Smith echoes this same idea when he states, "For each of these areas of petitionary

³²⁸ Smith, *Teach Us*, 107.

³²⁹ Rick Richardson, *Experiencing Healing Prayer: How God Turns Out Hurts Into Wholeness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 73-74.

prayer, we can pray, *Oh Spirit of God, guide me in my prayers—for what should I be praying as I pray for this person or this situation?*³³⁰

Richardson goes on to seek to provide guidance regarding how to listen for God's lead when asking how he would have us join Jesus in prayer for the person. He asks,

How can you learn to listen to God? The heart of the practices is learning to recognize that God is concretely present with you and then to ask good questions of this very present God. Then wait until he speaks into your heart and mind.

When I pray, first I focus my mind on God's presence by looking into the eyes of Jesus or looking around at nature and up to the heavens, opening my soul to God. Sometimes I focus on a biblical or Christian image that jumpstarts my intuitive and imaginative capacities. ...

Then I regularly ask God more general questions.

What are you saying? What are you saying to me? ...

What are you doing? What can I do with you? ...

What are you praying? How can I enter into your prayers for this person or this situation? ...

What's the one thing you want to minister to during this prayer time?

*What's the one next step you want this person to take?*³³¹

He notes that listening is an absolutely vital part of this work of intercessory prayer and that these questions are beneficial in that they open us to listening in particular ways. When it comes down to actually hearing God's direction for your prayer for the other, Richardson observes,

I look for the following qualities as signs of the experience of hearing God: the unexpectedness of a specific message, its weight of authority, a spirit of peace attending it and conformity of the content to what I know Jesus to be like. These signals give me great assurance in day-to-day life with Christ as companion and colaborer. Can I still be wrong in believing I have heard from God? Of course. But probably not often if I am consistently attuned to an ongoing conversation with God.³³²

Because it is certainly possible that we are wrong when we think we've discerned God's voice, we exercise great caution in what we "hear" from the Lord about another person. It is possible that an impression or an image we receive during our prayer for another is a penetrating insight that the person for whom we are praying may need to hear or learn *but* we must realize that they may need to hear it from the Lord himself and not necessarily from us. Be careful about what you do with what you experience while praying for another. If you believe that what you've

³³⁰ Smith, *Teach Us*, 107.

³³¹ Richardson, 75-76.

³³² *Ibid.*, 80.

experienced should be shared with the person, do so in a way that opens the possibility that this could be from the Lord or just from your own mind. Ask for permission to share.

While praying for a professor during a time of intercession, I felt a strong urge to put my hand on the professor's chest while we prayed for him. We had gathered around him to pray for him and put our hands on his shoulders or on one another's shoulders or hands as we circled him to pray. He had stated that he had had some pains in his chest and that he was scheduled for some tests the week after our class met. During our time of prayer for him, I experienced an inner impression to put my hand on his chest while we prayed, but I didn't do it. After the prayer time for him, he asked us whether anyone had any impressions while we prayed. I mentioned the urge to put my hand on his chest and I asked, "How do I know if that's something from the Lord or is just my own head?" He noted that we don't know but that we should own such impressions and nudges. He suggested that I could have said something like, "I don't know whether this is coming from the Lord or if it's coming from me but I get the sense that I should put my hand on your chest over your heart as we pray for you. Is that o.k.?" I asked if we could have a redo so that I could do that. He said sure. We prayed for him again and I prayed for him again with my hand on his chest. There was no warm feeling or any light that showed up in the room. If it was from the Lord, I was obedient. If it was from me, it was o.k. because I had asked permission to share in that way and it was agreed upon by the one receiving prayer. Praying for another person is a partnership with Jesus but it's also a partnership with that person receiving prayer as well. Be careful with both of these partnerships. Oh, and it turns out that there were no blockages in his heart (a concern). He was fine. I found out years later, when I saw him at a conference, that his heart is larger than what is needed for his body. I always knew he had a big heart!

Gordon Smith wisely points out that making requests for others and ourselves is only part of prayer and it assumes that one's prayer consists of more than just petition.

Petition assumes thanksgiving, confession, and discernment. But more, petition is really, in the end, nothing other than praying "thy kingdom come" in the lives of those we love, "thy kingdom come" within our church communities, and "thy kingdom come" within the cities where we live, the countries we call home, and the world that so deeply needs to know the saving power of the reign of Christ.³³³

This insight bridges our prayers of intercession for requested needs to our prayers of intercession for those who don't know Jesus as Lord and Savior.

When it comes to praying for the mission of the church to move forward, we need to recognize that Jesus himself was the first to invite such praying. As John Onwuchekwa notes,

Where do missionaries come from? Jesus seems to think they come as a result of God responding to our prayers: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore

³³³ Smith, *Teach Us*, 108.

pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2).³³⁴

He insightfully observes, however, “Many of our evangelistic efforts are driven solely by pragmatism and strategy, when lasting, abiding fruit comes from prayer (see John 15:8, 16).³³⁵ Praying for missionaries, laborers to enter the harvest fields, is vital. It is also vital to pray that people, who are being exposed to the gospel, have receptive hearts. Without prayer in this process all our efforts and strategies and cajoling are in vain.

We pray that our friends who don’t follow Jesus might have ears that hear the good news about Jesus’s sacrifice, God’s grace and the call to follow Jesus. We pray that God draws our friends to himself (John 6:44), allows them to repent as he wishes everyone to (2 Peter 3:9), and that they will confess that Jesus is Lord now as everyone will ultimately (Philippians 2:9-11). The actual conversion of our friends, however, is not in our hands. Our friends are in the hands of God. We have a role in loving our friends closer to Jesus but ultimately the Holy Spirit plays the primary role in convicting people of their need for Christ (John 16:8-11). Therefore, we also ask the Holy Spirit to do his important work to bring our friends to Jesus. When people for whom we have prayed do come to submit their lives to Jesus as Lord, we thank God for bringing them to himself and for letting us be a part of such joyous work.

Is it possible that the salvation of the world has not happened in the last 2,000 years because those of us in the church are very busy with many things that have nothing to do with the actual mission of the church? We are busy with Bible studies and church programs and many activities of life but we are not busied in the vital business of seeking and saving lost souls. We recognize our need for Jesus and we want to draw close to Father through Christ but we fail to discern the heartbeat of God for the child that has strayed from the fold. Is it possible that the feeling of disconnection from God we experience sometimes, is because he is out searching for the one lost and we are among the ninety-nine who do not need to repent? Perhaps we should be about the Father’s business and we may find that he is with us there in the thick of this great commission that Jesus gave his followers.

Paul Cho has noted,

Knowing that the church is the main obstacle to his purposes on earth, Satan is out to devour us as a roaring lion. Yet, the gospel of Christ must be preached and nations must be brought to the knowledge of God. These are two conflicting interests. And as we have learned through history, wars are fought because of conflicting interests among nations.

In intercession, the Christian enters into the priestly function of providing an earthly base for God’s heavenly interests. This age has become the battleground between the two opposing forces, but God has a group in the foreign land that is able to bring the influence

³³⁴ Onwuchekwa, 116.

³³⁵ Ibid., 112.

of the age to come into this age. Therefore, this natural world can be brought under the obvious control of the kingdom of God.”³³⁶

As God’s people on the scene of this foreign land through which we sojourn, we are called to be the salt and light that will season, preserve and show forth God’s presence and power, his kingdom reign, in our midst. We are invited to partner with him in his ongoing redemptive work. As we give witness to and pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, we open ourselves to his use and to seeing him do amazing things with us, in us and through us... to his glory.

Cho asks, “Why are we experiencing continuous revival in Korea? We have volunteered to pray until the gospel is preached in the whole world. The doors will be opened as the spiritual forces are bound in the name of Jesus!”³³⁷ May we be equally so bold and tireless in our conviction that prayer is vital to the salvation of the world.

Practice: Pray Scripture from the Praying Scripture handout 2 – 3 times this week.

³³⁶ Paul Y. Cho *Prayer: Key to Revival* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1984), 85.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

Session 9: Praying in dark nights -- illness & suffering – 10/23/19

We hadn't been trying. I was in graduate school and Connie, my wife, was the primary wage earner in the household. We had agreed that we would wait to have children until I was at least a little further along in graduate school, or at least working. When we found out that we were going to be parents, Connie was excited. I was stunned. I was trying to learn the fundamentals of Hebrew and how to exegete Greek better, I was surprised that this had happened. After about a month of getting used to the idea, I was accepting the fact that having a child is a significant blessing and I was growing even to like the idea.

The pains started one morning. I didn't understand what was happening. I just knew that Connie was really hurting. We got into our little 4-cylinder Renault and drove as quickly as we could to the hospital. Once there, the miscarriage was confirmed. Then Connie was prepped for the D & C. The phlebotomist had a hard time getting the IV into her vein. I suggested that he try a different vein. He refused. Connie was now hurting as a result of something I *could* stop. I *insisted*. The phlebotomist used a different vein.

A friend showed up at the hospital. He wasn't sure what to say. He just hung out with me and let me yell, swear, moan and complain and cry a bit. I was angry that Connie was going through such pain. I was angry that God had given us a baby and now it was gone. Just like that. The doctor had told me that sometimes the baby doesn't attach well to the uterine wall. She said that sometimes this happens and there are reasons, like an issue with the fetus. I understood with my head that this sort of thing happens. But going through it is not something you do with your logical faculties cued up. It's more of a gut thing; a heart thing.

When we returned home, we were no longer expectant parents. Our hearts hurt. Connie is a godly woman. She hurt but she leaned into God, her caring heavenly Father. I hurt too and was angry with God. I couldn't understand how he could bless us with a child one minute only to have it ripped from Connie's womb the next. There was a giant vacuum that sucked out my heart and made my arms ache for want of what was supposed to arrive months down the road. It didn't seem right.

How do you pray when you hurt? What do you do when the doctor walks through the door and says something like, "The tests don't look good, you have cancer"? What do you do when it feels like God is not only not in the same room, it seems like he's not in the same universe? How do you react when the darkness seems to overcome the light by which you are walking, living? Where do you go when you cry out to God but you don't hear anything, feel anything, sense anything in return?

I went to the book of Job. I read it through a couple of times. It didn't help much, maybe a little; very little. I didn't do my best work in school. I probably wasn't the best husband. I was confused as well as angry. To that point, I had an easy life. I hadn't experienced much pain. Was this what following Jesus really meant: when I really needed him, he was gone? All gut. It's where I had been kicked and where a baby was supposed to be in my wife.

Jesus had a gut-wrenching experience in Gethsemane. In his anguish, he sweat blood-like (Luke 22:44).³³⁸ The Bible tells us that Jesus told Judas to do what he would do quickly. Then it says that when Judas left the Passover meal, it was night (John 13:27-30). Darkness. Jesus and the disciples crossed to Gethsemane and he prayed and prayed in the dark while the three, the inner circle of Jesus' closest friends, slept (Matthew 26:40, 43, 45). It was night, after all. They had just had a big meal. The lamb was churning in their stomachs as they counted sheep there in the cool of the evening in the garden. As the digestive juices broke down their meal, Jesus, the lamb of God, was a stone's throw away in agony, being broken down by sorrow to the point of death (Matthew 26:38).

Difficult, even dark times are part of life. Stuff happens and the way we navigate these times depends on a number of factors. For instance, when a loved one dies, you may wonder how to go on with life. It's sad and hard. Thankfully, there is hope that comes from faith in Christ. There is more than just this life and our Father carries us along through such times granting us a confidence in more than what we see. However, there are times when God does not provide such consolation. There are times when you pray and there seems to be no connection, no communion, nothing. That is probably what Jesus felt when he prayed in the garden for the cup to pass from him. This may be part of what led to his cry from the cross into the darkness, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45-46)

From the beginning of his Gospel, John wrote about how the light of Jesus (the Word) overcomes darkness. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). In Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus states, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Later, Jesus said of himself, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Nearing the end of his life, he stated, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going" (John 12:35). In fact, he noted, "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness" (John 12:46).

The contrast between dark and light to which John and Jesus are pointing has more to do with the contrast between evil and righteousness than the darkness of difficult times. I spend time noting these references, however, to point out that if the One who is the light of the world himself experienced the silence of God in the midst of the agony of suffering, he is able to relate to and help us through our own dark times.

³³⁸ Hematidrosis is a condition in which tiny blood vessels in the skin break open and the blood gets squeezed out through sweat glands or may leak into hair follicles and be excreted through the skin. According to WebMD, this condition is sometimes caused by "extreme distress or fear, such as facing death, torture, or severe ongoing abuse." "What is Hermatidrosis?" WebMD, accessed October 11, 2019, <https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/hematidrosis-hematohidrosis#1>.

Kate Bowler, Associate Professor of History of Christianity in North America at Duke Divinity School, has written about her experience with Stage IV colon cancer. As she reminisced about Christmas in Canada, she wrote about her former Sunday school teacher, Carol who had helped her year after year get into her sheep costume for the Christmas program.

A couple of Christmases ago, I saw Carol over one of the pews and reached out to give her a hug, remembering only at the last second that she had recently been diagnosed with cancer. I couldn't figure out what to say when we pulled away and I found I was just staring into her smiling face stammering something about how sorry I was. She looked back at me with such calm and said something I had never heard anyone say.

"I have known Christ in so many good times," she said, sincerely and directly. "And now I will know Him better in His sufferings."³³⁹

A few pages later, Bowler, continued,

Carol surely wanted healing and more years with her husband and an escape from the creeping death that is multiplying cells and the fading powers of chemotherapy drugs. And yet she prayed for more than to be saved. She prayed in the long night of Advent that her waiting would end with a better angle of vision on the baby born to die.³⁴⁰

There are things that we can learn about Jesus only by going through difficult times. He is described as a man of suffering, familiar with pain (Isaiah 53:3). We will only know this aspect of his being through suffering ourselves. Difficult times make us face whether we want him or the feelings of him being close. Perhaps what we really want are easy lives with the occasional buzz of a great worship service, the warm fuzzies of Jesus being close and making his presence known. Do we want the feelings of God's love and presence or do we want God himself? Like Job, we may never know exactly why we go through suffering. The best we can do is to allow our suffering to draw us close to God who is sufficient to carry us through it.

Early in her book, Bowler notes,

What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says, "You are limitless"? Everything is not possible. The mighty Kingdom of God is not yet here. What if *rich* did not have to mean *wealthy*, and *whole* did not have to mean *healed*? What if being people of "the gospel" meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough.³⁴¹

God is present in whatever we go through. God loves us amidst the pain and the hallelujahs raised through gritted teeth. It is enough because he is enough.

³³⁹ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018), 95.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

Through the challenges of miscarrying our first child, I learned that God cared for us even when we couldn't feel him nearby. He was present in spite of my inability to sense him. He is faithful and patient. He allowed me to walk at my own pace and showed me that he loves us through whatever lows we experience and whatever outbursts we might toss his way. We also learn, on the other side of suffering, that Jesus' faithfulness is richer and more significant. Our sufferings are the context in which we learn the depth of Jesus' obedience. The writer of the Hebrews tells us, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:7-8). He suffered and walked through that suffering without wavering from the will of the Father. In spite of feeling like he had been abandoned by God, he did not shrink from the torture and sacrifice of the cross. He became the man of suffering, familiar with pain out of his focused desire to do the will of the Father no matter the cost. He did so for our benefit. He is most worthy of praise!

When we face difficult even dark times, what do you do? What do we need to remember or consider as we go through the scary times of severe illness or loss?

- **Hang on.** Even when it doesn't feel like God is present, he is. He will not forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6).
- **Keep praying.** Even though Jesus did not get the answer he desired, he returned to the Father throughout the night (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44; 27:46).
- **Consider** the possibility that God doesn't always get what he wants either. We just noted that Jesus, God incarnate, didn't get exactly what he wanted when he prayed in the garden. Likewise, the Father doesn't want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Yet we know that there will be some who do not repent, who choose not to believe in Jesus, the Christ. God's heart must hurt deeply but he will not force people to choose him. If God doesn't always get his way, we can be assured that everything will not always go our way.
- **Abide in his word.** Scripture can reorient us in the midst of the disorientation of suffering. Keep searching the Scriptures listening for God's voice to you.
- **Don't walk alone.** There are times when we can't pray and we need to be carried along by the prayers of fellow Jesus followers. There will be times when we can't worship that we need to be carried along by the worship of the church. We need trusted confidants who love us with whom we may make whatever outbursts may come.

Finally, I have copied a chapter from John Ortberg's book *Soul Keeping* for further examination of this topic and discussion next Wednesday.³⁴² There he references John of the Cross (born 1542). John of the Cross was a monk, priest, mystic and author. One of his writings included the "Dark Night of the Soul" in reference to the purification of the soul on its way toward union with God. His is beneficial insight into the experience of the contemplative. This is akin to our topic because the Dark Night that John of the Cross writes about includes suffering but it is a deeper more mystical discussion. I have limited this discussion to the way difficult

³⁴² John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

times may affect our practice of prayer and some encouragement to hold on through those times. Let's talk Wednesday.

Practice: Choose one of the past disciplines to practice this week.

APPENDIX B

PRAYER PRACTICES

Prayer Practices: Lectio Divina

What is this?

Lectio Divina (Latin for Divine Reading sometimes referred to as Sacred or Spiritual Reading) is an ancient monastic method of prayer that ultimately seeks communion with God through Scripture reading, meditation and prayer. This involves reading Scripture not for the sake of information or to learn something but for insight or to encounter Christ.³⁴³ Thus, the reading of Scripture is done leisurely, with purposeful moments of listening, pondering, considering, repetition of words and praying. This approach to prayer is intended to help one hear the voice of God through the written word of God and experience Scripture as a word to us. One author says of this method of prayer, “The end of the practice is to keep the monk’s mind and heart filled with the Word of God so that the whole inner life (and subsequently activity) is shaped by Scripture.”³⁴⁴

Movements

Lectio Divina is typically divided into four movements or moments: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. Each of these is undertaken with a conscious recognition that we are seeking to encounter God through his Word. Therefore, some include an initial movement of *silencio* to prepare for this encounter. Here is a brief introduction to each of these movements.

Silencio. Having chosen a brief section of Scripture to read, Lectio Divina begins with a period of time of silent preparation (*silencio*). Ruth Barton shares that this is a time to “become quiet in God’s presence and touch our desire to hear from God. This gives us the opportunity to allow the busyness and chaos of our life to settle down until there is a quiet inner space in which we can hear from God.”³⁴⁵ During this preparation, what we desire is very important. If we find ourselves wishing to be finished with this time, it is unlikely that we will encounter God. However, if we are open to meeting with God, if we have confessed our need for him and a desire to meet with him, we are properly positioning ourselves for a time with the Lord.

³⁴³ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1994), 46.

³⁴⁴ Bonnie Thurston, *For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 57.

³⁴⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 56.

Lectio. We then read the selected Scripture through completely at least two times with a listening heart. We are listening for God’s voice to us through the Scripture. As we read through the second time, we attend to a verse, phrase or word that “jumps out” to us during this time. We are aware of what phrase we are drawn to because it may resonate with us in positive ways or a phrase that we may resist or a verse that causes us to think in a new way. When we hear this word or phrase, we stop reading. This sort of attentive reading is for our formation not for information. Therefore, we are after quality not quantity. We are seeking encounter *with* God not new information *about* God. We asked God to meet with us during *silencio*. Now we need to be open to his voice to us through his Spirit impressing upon us a *word* from the Scriptures.

Meditatio. We now linger longer with this word, phrase or verse considering not what it means or why it has impressed itself upon us but to savor this as a word from God to us. We may ask, “What word(s) caught my attention?” “What in this passage comforted me?” “What challenged me?” We then begin to listen to the word for us. We repeat the word or phrase to ourselves abiding in Christ’s word to us. We might reflect on our life context and the way in which this word addresses us at this point in time. Barton suggests asking the question, “What is it in my life that needed to hear this word today? Or, if the passage is a story: Where am I in this text, and what do I experience as I allow myself to be in this story?”³⁴⁶ This is a time to stay attentive to what God may be saying through his word to us in our context. We don’t want to go too far afield from the word or phrase upon which we are focusing. In this movement, we invite our hearts to respond to this word as we ponder and we may find we respond in varying ways. This leads to *oratio*.

Oratio. After reading the passage again, *oratio* is a time for our hearts to respond to what God has been speaking to us during *lectio* and *meditatio*. This movement is our time to speak our hearts back to God in prayer either silently or out loud. “Oratio is the deep, almost automatic cry of the heart when it meets the God to which Scripture points.”³⁴⁷ The response may vary depending on the word received from the Lord through the Scriptures. It may take the form of praise, confession, petition, thanks or repentance. The expression does not need to be long. It could be a brief, “Hallelujah!” or “Bless the Lord O my soul!” or extended expressions of thanks. The word received may be a surprise and it is totally appropriate to respond, “What?! Are you kidding?!” This time is for such real, honest “automatic” cries from our hearts. This time is frequently brief because we are seeking to allow our hearts to respond, we are not seeking to bring our entire prayer list to God. Thurston notes, “When you can’t relaxedly maintain the *oratio* without distraction, either resume *lectio* or bring your period of prayer to a close.”³⁴⁸

Contemplatio. Read the passage one last time. *Contemplatio* is both the movement of quiet rest in God and the word he has spoken to us *and* the first steps in living out the word given (which some call *incarnatio*). It is the posture of the weaned child with its mother (Psalm 131:2); a quiet reception of or waiting upon the presence of God in which we rest. “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7a) expresses this movement. “*Contemplatio* is a complete and

³⁴⁶ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 57.

³⁴⁷ Thurston, 63.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

total ‘yes’ to the God encountered in the Word. This comes in deep silence or quietude as a result of our complete open-ness to God, but our complete open-ness does not cause it. It is pure gift.”³⁴⁹ But we do not leave these moves of prayer without reference to them the rest of the day. During this final movement, “we resolve to carry this word with us and live it out (*incarnatio*) in our daily life. We continue to listen to it throughout the day as we are led deeper and deeper into its meaning and it begins to live in us.”³⁵⁰

See the two examples provided.

Lectio Divina³⁵¹

Lectio Divina is a natural way of praying that nourishes our relationship with God. In any relationship there are different moments, ways in which we listen and respond to each other. So too in Lectio Divina there are different moments as we listen to God’s Word and respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit within us. Each moment is a way of praying in itself as well as a part of the larger context of our relationship God.

First Moment: Listening to the Word of God

The first moment is listening to the Word of God by slowly reading a sacred text. You do not read for information but rather to grasp the meaning of the text. What is God saying in these inspired words of sacred scripture? What is the message God is trying to convey? You listen attentively by:

Learning to Be Quiet Within:

- Begin by asking the Holy Spirit to quiet the noise within and free you to listen and hear the meaning of the Word you are about to read.
- Take time to acknowledge God within you and God present in the scriptures.

Listening to the Word:

- Choose a passage from scripture and slowly begin reading the text.
- As a word or phrase in the text speaks, rest with it.
- Listen deeply with the ear of your heart, listen in a spirit of silence and awe.

Being Receptive to the Word of God:

- Let the text speak.
- Take it in; allow the word to penetrate every level of your being.

Text: Matthew 25 -

¹⁴Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another

³⁴⁹ Thurston, 65.

³⁵⁰ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 58.

³⁵¹ This Lectio was compiled by Jared Ott and was used with students of Reach Out on Campus at Ohio University spring 2010.

one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. ¹⁷So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. ¹⁸But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

²¹"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

²²"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

²³"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

²⁴"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

²⁶"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.'

²⁸" 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. ²⁹For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ³⁰And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Second Moment: Reflecting on the Word of God

The second moment in your relationship with God is pondering the Word of God in your heart. You do not analyze the meaning of the Word of God, rather you wait upon it, take it in and allow it to speak to your thoughts, hopes, memories, desires. You do this by:

Letting the Word Speak:

- Let yourself be drawn into one verse or one word of the scripture passage you have chosen.
- Wait upon the Word of God; take it in and allow it to speak to your thoughts, hopes, memories, desires.

Repeating the Word:

- Say over and over the word or phrase that draws your attention.
- Let the Word penetrate into your being so you will become one with the text.

Reflecting on the Word:

- In an open and receptive attitude, listen to the Word and let its inner meaning come to you.
- Let the Word touch and affect you at the deepest level.

Allow the Word to Penetrate:

- Listen and linger.
- Be open to a new way of looking at the text.
- Repeat the text until it can be said by heart.

Third Moment: Responding to the Word of God

In this moment, you respond to the Word of God. Allow yourself to be touched by the Word and be willing to change as need be. Your response in trust allows God slowly to become the center of who you are, the center of your life. You do this by

Responding to the Word:

- Pray to God asking for the grace to be open, to respond to the Word of God.
- Converse with God who has invited and embraced you.

Being Open:

- Allow the Word to touch and change your deepest self, letting go of any obstacles that block your response to God.
- Pray for the grace to change and respond to God's Word.

Fourth Moment: Resting in the Word of God

The fourth moment in your relationship with God is simply being with or resting in God's presence. Your intention is to surrender to God's Word. Rest in the silence, trusting that God will transform you as you give yourself over. You do this by:

Becoming Still:

- Be aware of God's presence within you and around you.
- Let go of words and thoughts and simply enjoy being in God's transforming presence.
- Be concerned with being, not doing.

Repeating the Message or Word of Sacred Scripture:

- Choose a word from scripture that expresses the message you have gleaned from the reading and that will help you stay in the silence.
- Repeat the Word when you find yourself distracted, allowing the Word to help you return to a quiet resting in God's presence.

Resting in God's Embrace:

- Respond to the invitation to simply be with God.
- Rest in God's Word from scripture.
- Allow God's touch to heal your deepest wounds.

Prayer Practices: S.O.A.P.S. Notes on Scripture

There are a variety of ways of reading Scripture with prayerful attentiveness. The previous practice, *Lectio Divina*, stressed listening to the Scriptures to hear God's voice for us for the day. This week's practice, similarly, seeks to get us to hear God's voice through the Scriptures but the focus is on understanding and obedience. We will practice this method of Bible reading as a prayer practice. As we seek to discern the Spirit's voice in the Scriptures, we will respond to God by prayer and obedience.

This particular approach to prayer comes from the *Zúme Project Guidebook*.³⁵² *Zúme Training* is free on-line training in Disciple Making Movement principles designed to equip disciples to make more disciples. The S.O.A.P.S. Bible Reading format consists of the following:³⁵³

- **Scripture:** Write out one or more verses than are particularly meaningful to you, today.
- **Observation:** Rewrite those verses or key points in your own words to better understand.
- **Application:** Think about what it means to obey these commands in your own life.
- **Prayer:** Write out a prayer telling God what you've learned and how you plan to obey.
- **Sharing:** Ask God who He wants you to share with about what you've learned / applied.

The example provided in the *Zúme Guidebook* is as follows:

- S** – “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9
- O** – As a human, I'm limited in what I know and what I know how to do. God is not limited in any way. He sees and knows EVERYTHING. He can do ANYTHING.
- A** – Since God knows everything and His ways are best, I'll have much more success in life if I follow Him instead of relying on my own way of doing things.
- P** – Lord, I don't know how to live a good life that pleases You and helps others. My ways lead to mistakes. My thoughts lead to hurt. Please teach me Your ways and Your thoughts, instead. Let your Holy Spirit guide me as I follow You.
- S** – I will share these verses and this application with my friend, Steve, who is going through a difficult time and needs direction for important decisions he's facing.

Another example of my own. Note that the “O” might include restating the text or making an observation about the text.

³⁵² The S.O.A.P.S. model is found in the unpublished *Zúme Guidebook* page 4 but also may be found online at <https://zume.training/soaps-bible-reading/>

³⁵³ The following bullet points and the example are from the *Zúme Guidebook* page 4. https://storage.googleapis.com/zume-file-mirror/en/33_en_zume_guidebook.pdf

- S** – “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.” Mark 1:35
- O** – Very early – while still dark, the Lord went alone to pray.
The Lord led / practiced a disciplined life at a young age. He “sold” sleep to pray. It must have been hard with people always wanting him to do something for them (v. 37).
- A** – How do I change my schedule to make this happen? Ideas: 5:30 – up and quiet time, 6:30 – exercise, 7:00 – cool down, 7:30 shower?
- P** – Lord, guide me onto a path, even out of my comfort zone, that will put me before you so that you might shape me.
- S** – Life Group and Brandon.

Practice: At least 2-3 times this week.

- Pick a Scripture. It may be from a current reading plan that you have been using or perhaps start afresh in one of the Gospels.
- Use the S.O.A.P.S. acrostic and listen for God’s voice as you read through the Scripture making notes in a journal or on a piece of paper.

Prayer Practices: Journaling

Journaling, as a spiritual practice, helps us to listen for God’s voice through Scripture, our experiences, relationships, nature and even through reflecting upon our own habits of sin. It helps us to slow down in order to attend to the movement of God in our lives: to ponder, to focus our thoughts and our prayers. The act of writing about one’s own daily stressors has been shown to be, in itself, beneficial for one’s physical and emotional health.³⁵⁴ The practice of writing down reflections about our thoughts, feelings and experiences with God is likewise helpful for our spiritual health.

What do I write?

There is no “one size fits all” way to journal. One author states, “There is no right way to journal.”³⁵⁵ Your handwriting doesn’t have to be impeccable, your spelling correct or even your sentences complete. Just write. Write what you’re thinking and feeling. Write about your dreams or your memories. Write about the day’s events. Not all of your journaling necessarily needs to be about reflecting upon scripture. However, God has given us the scriptures for the purpose of shaping and forming us for his service (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Therefore, the sort of journaling that most benefits our formation for service, our relationship with God and our Christlike development, keeps God and his word in primary focus.

You might, for instance, begin your time of journaling with prayer asking God to be present with you as you open yourself to him and his word. As you spend some silent time considering his love and grace, welcoming the Holy Spirit’s presence to guide you, you might write a brief, personal psalm of praise. You may write out a verse that comes to mind. It doesn’t have to be an exact quote. Write it down and “chew” on it for a bit in writing. How does that verse impact you right now? Ask God, in writing, why he brought that verse to mind or impressed it on your heart just now?

Don’t forget to pause in order to listen for God’s response. You might even write out what you imagine that God might say to you in response to your questions. Just remember that these musings should be guided by God’s revealed character in scripture. Don’t imagine God saying something contrary to what he has revealed himself to be in Christ and scripture. Do, however, make this time of journaling as interactive a conversation with God as possible.

As you read scripture for the day, you might write out prayers, poems or psalms in response to the scriptures you read. You may want to write out questions you have about the text you’ve read or you may want to write out a verse that you’d like to memorize later.

³⁵⁴ Rachel Grate, “Science Shows Something Surprising About People Who Still Journal,” Mic, February 17, 2015, accessed September 4, 2019, <https://www.mic.com/articles/110662/science-shows-something-surprising-about-people-who-still-journal>.

³⁵⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 57.

How much do I write?

The joy of journaling is that you set the pace and the limits. You may want to limit your writing to keeping a record of your prayer requests. That may only require five minutes. That's okay. You may want to spend fifty minutes writing out prayers and scripture reflections. You may write just five sentences or five pages or limit yourself to one page each day. You get to choose. Use this practice as a way of recording your thoughts and interactions with God, reflections upon scripture and noting God's faithful responses to your prayers. Never hesitate to read past journal entries. It is encouraging to read your own record of God's faithfulness to you, his dear child.

Practice (Two or three times this week)

Find a quiet place, free from distraction. Begin with prayer. Write. You can do it!

Here's a format to follow, if this is helpful.³⁵⁶

Record the date and scripture to be read.

Quiet your heart and focus. Find a place avoiding distractions. Call upon the Holy Spirit to be with you as you read and think. Remember Psalm 19:14

“May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

Carefully read the text. Read for formation not just information. Be attentive to what strikes you, bothers you, challenges you, compels you. What does the scripture tell you about God? Why would God want to include this message in his Word? How might this change the way you live? Write your thoughts and questions. Questions can be very important for digging deeper.

Pray in response to your mediation. Pray for God's guidance in your response to his Word. Be ready with confession and repentance. Be sensitive to direction for the journey of the day, dealing with others, looking for God's hand and love.

Reflect throughout the day on the scripture. Write the verses to have them available for reflection.

Record any additional thoughts at the end of the day.

³⁵⁶ This compilation is something that Connie Teske put together from several sources.

Prayer Practices: The Jesus Prayer & Breath Prayers

Jesus taught his disciples that we don't have to use a lot of words to connect with our heavenly Father. He demonstrated this in the prayer that he gave his disciples to pray in Matthew 6 (discussed in session 4). With that prayer, he gave additional teaching about prayer. He told his disciples not to be like the hypocrites who love to pray standing in synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others (Matthew 6:5). He also instructed them not to be like pagans who think they will be heard because of their many words (Matthew 6:7). "For your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8) is one reason why our words need not be many.

This is not to say that God doesn't want to hear from us. He is not drumming his fingers on his celestial desk while we speak with him as though he has something else he wants to do. He loves us and delights in our presence. There are times, however, when we need simply to focus on his presence with us and our presence with Him. Rather than running through the events of the day or our list of needs for ourselves or others, there are times when we need to sit and just be *with* him. One way of doing that is through the use of so-called "breath prayers."

One of the oldest ways of praying in Christian tradition is by praying the Jesus Prayer, also called "the prayer of the heart." Thurston provides a history of the prayer which is very helpful. A few notes from that discussion are pertinent here.

The Jesus Prayer is associated with a tradition of inner, mystical prayer made famous by the monks of Mount Athos but which is much older than that in Christian tradition. It is associated with hesychasm. The word *hesychia* means "quiet," "solitude" or "inner stillness." "Quiet serenity" might be a good modern translation. The word is used first in connection with the desert fathers and others of the fourth century.³⁵⁷

These early monks sought to attend to the presence of God within them to come to experience God's presence and energies within themselves by keeping their minds and hearts focused on Jesus. One way of doing so was to focus on the name of Jesus in prayer.

The ancient forms of prayer that centered on the repetition of the name of Jesus assisted Christians in coming to experience God's energies in the heart. The Jesus Prayer came to be known as "the prayer of the heart," which it was hoped would literally lead one to enlightenment, to experiencing God's light. As Bishop Kallistos Ware put it, "The Jesus Prayer causes the brightness of the Transfiguration to penetrate into every corner of our life."

These are, of course, powerful and extraordinary claims. And it was the claim to experience directly God's divine light that touched off the hesycast controversy...one of

³⁵⁷ Thurston, 88. See also, Robert Morris, "Reclaiming the Body in Prayer: How Flesh Speaks Soul." *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation* 9, no. 1 (Spring / Summer 2011): 56-59.

the reasons for the dying out of many aspects of contemplative prayer in the Western Church.³⁵⁸

You may wonder why I include all this historical narration as part of an introduction to this form of prayer. I believe that it is important to remember that any form of prayer can be taken to an extreme. It is possible to get wrapped up in any form of prayer and completely miss the point of connecting with the Father relationally. It is possible to meditate our way into nothingness or to euphoria and imagine that we have connected to the divine. It is possible to have feelings of God's presence but not really experience God's presence. We must always exercise caution when exploring forms of prayer.

Having said this, I believe that the Jesus Prayer and other breath prayers may be beneficial in centering our thoughts upon God. It may be especially helpful for those who have difficulty focusing their minds upon God's presence in Christ and the Holy Spirit. The prayer itself is taken from the teaching of several scriptures (such as Philippians 2:9-11, 1 Corinthians 12:3, Luke 18:13, 38). The prayer is not always stated exactly the same but a standard form is this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."³⁵⁹

I refer to The Jesus Prayer as a breath prayer because it is helpful to pray this prayer in concert with a conscious attention to our breath. Attending to our breathing can help us relax in the presence of God and help us to focus on our prayer. Breathing slowly and deeply helps clear the tension from the day or a specific experience in the moment. The Jesus Prayer prayed in the rhythm of our breathing can help us concentrate on each phrase. For instance, we might pray, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God" during inhalation and then pray "have mercy on me, a sinner" during exhalation. Praying in this manner, slowly, focusing on the Lord and this request, helps us to enter the Lord's presence and reminds us of his constant presence surrounding us and within us. We may find that the Lord is nearer than we imagined. We may sense that God has refreshed us by reminding us of his great grace and forgiveness. Rest in that time and in his presence. You may pray for five minutes or for twenty-five minutes. Remember, however, the point is not to pray for a certain amount of time or to repeat the prayer a certain number of times, the focus is to center upon God's presence in Christ and his ever-available mercy for us.³⁶⁰

Other examples of breath prayers include, "Abba I, belong to you" prayed: "Abba I," during inhalation and "belong to you" on exhalation. Some just pray the name of Jesus over and over again. Short phrases from Scripture may be used as breath prayers such as, "Not my will, but yours be done," "Here I am, send me," "Come quickly, Lord Jesus," or "Speak, Lord, I am

³⁵⁸ Thurston, 89.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 93. This is the form that Thurston suggests. Others may shorten the prayer in various ways, such as, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," or "Lord have mercy."

³⁶⁰ For an Eastern Orthodox perspective on the prayer see the example provided from Saint George Greek Orthodox Cathedral. "Jesus Prayer," Orthodox Prayer, accessed September 12, 19, https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Articles_files/Jesus%20Prayer%20Brochure.pdf.

listening” are phrases that may be prayed in rhythm with one’s breathing allowing us to slow down and focus on God’s presence

Practice: Pray the Jesus Prayer or one of the other breath prayers suggested for a period of at least 5-10 minutes 2-3 times this week. You might practice this in partnership with fasting during one or more meals this week.

Prayer Practices: The Zúme Prayer Cycle

The following tool comes directly from the *Zúme Guidebook* that may be located on their website and downloaded in its entirety at no cost.³⁶¹

The Zúme Prayer Cycle is a simple tool for practicing prayer. You can use it by yourself, and you can share it with any Jesus follower. In just 12 simple steps - 5 minutes each - this Prayer Cycle guides you through twelve ways the Bible teaches us to pray. At the end, you'll have prayed for an hour.



Figure 8. Zúme Prayer Cycle

PRAISE: Start your prayer hour by praising the Lord. Praise Him for things that are on your mind right now. Praise Him for one special thing He has done in your life in the past week. Praise Him for His goodness to your family.

³⁶¹ *Zúme Guidebook*, 6-7.

WAIT: Spend time waiting on the Lord. Be silent and let Him pull together reflections for you.

CONFESS: Ask the Holy Spirit to show you anything in your life that might be displeasing to Him. Ask Him to point out attitudes that are wrong, as well as specific acts for which you have not yet made a prayer of confession. Now confess that to the Lord so that you might be cleansed.

READ THE WORD: Spend time reading in the Psalms, in the prophets, and passages on prayer located in the New Testament.

ASK: Make requests on behalf of yourself.

INTERCESSION: Make requests on behalf of others.

PRAY THE WORD: Pray specific passages. Scriptural prayers as well as a number of psalms lend themselves well to this purpose.

THANK: Give thanks to the Lord for the things in your life, on behalf of your family, and on behalf of your church.

SING: Sing songs of praise or worship or another hymn or spiritual song.

MEDITATE: Ask the Lord to speak to you. Have a pen and paper ready to record impressions He gives you.

LISTEN: Spend time merging the things you have read, things you have prayed and things you have sung and see how the Lord brings them all together to speak to you.

PRAISE: Praise the Lord for the time you have had to spend with Him and the impressions He has given you. Praise Him for His glorious attributes.

Practice: Create space and spend at least one hour in prayer using the prayer cycle this week.

Prayer Practices: Praying Scripture

We have been using the Psalms to open our times of prayer together on Wednesday nights and you have been encouraged to use them to guide you in times of prayer with your prayer partners as well. Likewise, when we discussed the Lord's Prayer, we noted that it is certainly appropriate to pray the prayer as it has been given to us in Scripture. This prayer practice continues that approach and expands it a bit with the use of other prayers in Scripture.

The benefit of praying Scripture is that it provides us with language that we might not normally use. I think that I've mentioned before that it expands our prayer "vocabulary" and enables us to pray beyond ourselves not simply in terms of praying beyond our own individual needs, but also beyond our own prayer "categories" and thought. Praying Scripture also provides us with language that is from the Spirit Himself, for he inspired the original authors of these prayers and so we can be confident that these prayers are definitely in line with God's desire for his people.

There are many prayers prayed throughout the Scriptures beyond the Psalms and they may speak our hearts at different points along our journey of life in Christ. Praying these particular prayers is not some magical talisman. Just because we pray a particular prayer found in Scripture for ourselves, does not mean that God need answer it for us in our circumstance. In fact, there are likely some prayers that we should not pray for ourselves depending on our particular circumstances or our own willingness to live up to the prayer we are praying. For instance, it is possible that a person, who has no intention to share the gospel or speak forth God's word to others, wanting to sound bold, may pray with Isaiah, "Here I am Lord, send me!" Such a prayer is not one that person should pray for there is no intention of heart to respond to God's summons unless the person is praying for a heart willing to obey God's call.

Prayers that put ourselves directly before God for his continuing work upon our hearts are prayers well worth praying. God knows our hearts and is pleased by the humble petitioner who wishes to grow in grace and knowledge of God. A couple of examples include:

Col 1:9-12

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.

This prayer might be prayed, "Father fill me with the knowledge of your will through all wisdom and understanding that your Spirit gives so that I may live a life worthy of you and please you in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of you, being strengthened with all power according to your glorious might so that I may have great endurance

and patience, and give joyful thanks to you, who qualified me to share in the inheritance of your holy people in the kingdom of light.”

Eph 1:17-19a

¹⁷I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

This may be prayed, “Father, give me the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that I may know you better. Enlighten the eyes of my heart so that I may know the hope to which you have called me, the riches of your glorious inheritance in your holy people, and your incomparable great power for us who believe.”

Ephesians 3:16-21

¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

This might be prayed, “I pray that out of your glorious riches you might strengthen me with power through your Spirit in my inner being, so that Christ may dwell in my heart through faith. I pray that I might be rooted and established in love and have power, with all your holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is. I pray that I might know this love that surpasses knowledge and be filled to the measure of all your fullness. You are able to do immeasurably more than all I ask or imagine according to your power that is at work within me. To you be glory in your people and in Christ Jesus through all generations for ever and ever! Amen.”

In addition to these prayers, I have copied some pages from Bill Thrasher’s book, *A Journey to Victorious Praying* in which he provides reference to many prayers throughout the Old and New Testaments. Praying such prayers as the Pauline prayers above opens us to the work of God to conform us to the pattern of his Son and make us vessels useful for his service, IF such prayers are accompanied by hearts that desire for God to respond. **Practice:** Pray Scripture prayers 2-3 times this week.

Prayer Practices: Prayer Walking

As we partner with Jesus in his mission, one useful tool is prayer walking. This practice is frequently used by missionaries as they seek to discern where God is already at work among people. Prayer walking neighborhoods is a great way of meeting neighbors and as conversations begin and develop, relationships are formed and grow. There are several resources that offer help so that we might grow in this practice.

The Zúme Project guidebook has some very helpful and practical guidance for prayer walking.

Prayer Walking is a simple way to obey God's command to pray for others. And it's just what it sounds like - praying to God while walking around.

Instead of closing our eyes and bowing our heads, we keep our eyes open to the needs we see around us and bow our hearts to ask humbly for God to intervene.

You can prayer walk in small groups of two or three or you can prayer walk by yourself.

If you go in a group - try having everyone pray out loud, a conversation with God about what everyone is seeing and the needs that God brings to their hearts. If you go by yourself - try praying silently when alone and out loud when you pray with someone you meet along the way.

Here are four ways you can know what to pray for during your Prayer Walk:

OBSERVATION - What do you see? If you see a child's toy in a yard, you might be prompted to pray for the neighborhood's children, for families or for schools in the area.

RESEARCH - What do you know? If you've read up about the neighborhood, you might know something about the people who live there, or if the area suffers from crime or injustice. Pray about these things and ask God to act.

REVELATION - The Holy Spirit may nudge your heart or bring an idea to mind for a particular need or area of prayer. Listen - and pray!

SCRIPTURE - You may have read part of God's Word in preparation for your walk or as you walk, the Holy Spirit may bring a Scripture to mind. Pray about that passage and how it might impact the people in that area.

Here are five areas of influence that you can focus on during your prayer walk:

GOVERNMENT - Look for and pray over Government centers such as courthouses, commission buildings or law enforcement offices. Pray for the area's protection, for justice and for godly wisdom for its leaders.

BUSINESS AND COMMERCE - Look for and pray over Commercial centers such as financial districts or shopping area. Pray for righteous investments and good stewardship of resources. Pray for economic justice and opportunity and for generous and godly givers who put people before profits.

EDUCATION - Look for and pray over Educational centers such as schools and administration buildings, vocational training centers, community colleges and universities. Pray for righteous educators to teach God's truth and protect the minds of their students. Pray that God would intervene in every effort to promote lies or confusion. Pray that these places would send out wise citizens who have a heart to serve and lead.

COMMUNICATION - Look for and pray over Communication centers such as radio stations, tv stations and newspaper publishers. Pray for God's Story and the testimony of His followers to be spread throughout the city and around the world. Pray that His message is delivered through His medium to His multitudes and that God's people everywhere will see God's work.

SPIRITUALITY - Look for and pray over Spiritual centers such as church buildings, mosques or temples. Pray that every spiritual seeker would find peace and comfort in Jesus and not be distracted or confused by any false religion.

B.L.E.S.S. Prayer

Finally, here are five ways you can pray for people you meet during your Prayer Walk:

As you walk and pray, be alert for opportunities and listen for promptings by God's Spirit to pray for individuals and groups you meet along the way.

You can say, "We're praying for this community, is there anything in particular we can pray for you about?" Or say, "I'm praying for this area. Do you know anything in particular we should pray for?" After listening to their response, you can ask about their own needs. If they share, pray for them right away. If the Lord leads, you may pray about other needs as well.

Use the word B.L.E.S.S. to help you remember 5 different ways you can pray:

- **Body [health]**
- **Labor [job and finances]**
- **Emotional [morale]**
- **Social [relationships]**
- **Spiritual [knowing and loving God]**

In most cases, people are grateful you care enough to pray.

If the person is not a Christian, your prayer may open the door to a spiritual conversation and an opportunity to share your story and God's story. You can invite them to be a part of a Bible study or even host one in their home.

If the person is a Christian you can invite them to join your Prayer Walk or train them how they can Prayer Walk and use simple steps like praying for areas of influence or the B.L.E.S.S. Prayer to grow God's family even more.³⁶²

Alex and Hannah Absalom also have a very helpful video that takes you along on a prayer walk as they walk you through the fundamentals of prayer walking. That video is very helpful and I encourage you to view it before your prayer walk. You may access the video at <http://www.dandelionresourcing.com/2019/06/20/prayer-walking-watch-us-do-it/>. (You may also access this video through the FCCC website <http://www.ferncreekcc.org/multiplying>)

Ed Stetzer also provides wise guidance for prayer walking as a way of exegeting a culture. He suggests that as we walk the streets of our neighborhood and city, we should pray as we go. We may,

- Ask God to help you reach the people in the homes you pass.
- Ask God to prepare people's hearts to receive his Word and draw them daily to Jesus Christ.
- Ask God to reveal a person of peace as you move around the area.
- Ask God to help you understand the practical needs you see.³⁶³

Recognizing that prayer walking can be hard work requiring focus, patience and wisdom and those who do may experience spiritual battles, Steve Hawthorne and Graham Kendrick offer some cogent advice for preparing for your prayer walk.

You are about to become a bridge of blessing between heaven and earth. You are adequate for the task, provided you give your whole self—body, mind, heart and spirit. It makes sense to begin every prayer-walk with a time of worship before God.

- **Prepare your heart.** Open your mouth in order to open your heart. Whether you sing, shout or whisper, warm up your vocal cords with praise before setting out. Put the name of Jesus on your lips. Dismiss, for the time being, other desires or affections, however legitimate they may be. Seek to position your heart before God in fresh gratitude and blessing.
- **Gather your mind.** Take charge of the directions your mind will go. Fix your attention on the purposes and ways and thoughts of God before you launch out. The simplest way to direct your train of thought is to read Scripture audibly.

³⁶² *Zúme Guidebook*, 16-18.

³⁶³ Ed Stetzer, *Exegete Your Culture: 10 Checkpoints for Knowing and Reaching Your Culture* (self-published PDF, 2016), 23. Accessed September 3, 2019, <https://edstetzer.com/exegete-free/>.

There may be pressures weighing upon you, demanding your attention: Leave them with God.

What can you do to keep your mind clear of distracting pressures during the prayerwalk? Some prayerwalkers bring along a small piece of paper on which they can jot down ideas or reminders of urgent affairs that may occur to them.

- **Seek God for guidance.** Be still before him for a short while at least, with a readiness to sense special instructions regarding where you should walk or what you should pray.

...

Relax regarding guidance. The whole idea of guidance is that you have a guide. Perhaps no more guidance is needed than was received on the last occasion of prayerwalking. Go with the plans you have formed unless you clearly sense otherwise.

Guidance can be a distracting game. Pursuing new guidance can even be a subtle excuse for a failure to persevere. Don't get trapped into thinking that every prayerwalk session is to be different or that God must give you additional communiques at every street corner. Expect some happy surprises, but most of prayer is persistence.³⁶⁴

The best way to begin prayer walking is by beginning. Take a step and keep going. Be alert and pray. You can do this!!

Practice: Go on a prayer walk at least once this week. You may walk your neighborhood or one nearby or go to the mall and pray for people and situations you see (you don't have to tell people you are praying for them).

³⁶⁴ Steve Hawthorne and Graham Kendrick, *Prayer-Walking: Praying On-Site with Insight* (Orlando: Creation House, 1993), 27-28.

Prayer Practices: Prayer Plan

Thank you for taking time to walk through this experiment together! It has been a delight to explore the study and practice of prayer with you. Now what? We all have a choice to make. We can leave this behind us or we can take it with us. We leave this behind by allowing this to become a happy memory. “That was a great study!” “I remember doing that Zúme Prayer Cycle.” “I once prayer walked my neighborhood as part of a study.” These are ways of leaving it behind. On the other hand, if we say, “I have been carving out time to spend a few lengthy times with God in prayer a couple of times a month.” “I have found there is a gap in my heart that is so empty when I don’t spend time with the Father so I’ve been ensuring that I am in his word listening for him at least 4 times a week.” “I am starting to pay attention to the little things I hear from God and I’m beginning to hear more from Him.” These are ways of taking this experience with us and growing in the practice of prayer. But what do we do to ensure the latter? Great question!

Below are a few questions that may help us identify what we can do to make a plan for a regular rhythm of prayer. Ruth Barton offers some great help. She states, “A Rule of Life is a pattern of attitudes, behaviors, and practices—sacred rhythms—that we choose regularly and routinely in order to create space for God to do his transforming work in our lives.”³⁶⁵ She notes that such rule of life rhythms, what we’re calling a “Prayer Plan,” will be:

- **PERSONAL.** Start with one or two disciplines you feel drawn to or that correspond to areas of need. Practice them in ways that fit your personality and the particularities of your life.
- **REALISTIC.** Take into account your current stage of life, your schedule, the demands of your family and your work, etc.
- **BALANCED.** Keep a balance between various disciplines—those that come easily for you and those that stretch you.
- **FLEXIBLE.** Hold your rhythms flexibly rather than being rigid about them.

Two questions: *Who do I want to be?* and *How do I want to live?*

*How do I want to live so I can be who I want to be?*³⁶⁶

We have discussed or practiced: Prayer being a response to whom God has revealed himself to be, faith, Lectio Divina, Acronym Prayer (ACTS), The Jesus prayer and other breath prayers, S.O.A.P.S., journaling, solitude, fasting, praying with others, praying as embodied beings, posture, Zúme Prayer Cycle, praying Scripture, intercession, prayer walking, and persistent praying through difficulties. Consider which of these tools have been helpful, which have been challenging and which you want to ensure that you continue to practice. Ask God what he is calling you to include in your life at this season of life. Listen. Identify a few goals

³⁶⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Spiritual Practices that Nourish Your Soul and Transform Your Life Participant’s Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 69.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

(daily, monthly, quarterly and / or annual) and write them on the back considering your year. Plan to pray. Make a plan. Pray.

I have included a copy of the Rule of Life session in Barton's workbook for more guidance, if you need it. God's grace be upon you as you continue to walk faithfully with him communing with the Father who loves you and delights to be with you moment by moment.

APPENIX C
SESSION NOTES

Prayer project intro session

Objectives:

- Orient participants to the group process and one another.
- Participants will know something specific about one another's walk with Jesus and learn one another's expectations of this group.
- Prayer partners will be assigned and will be asked to meet to get acquainted.
- Prayer in the context of the kingdom of God will be discussed.

Welcome

Psalm 28 and prayer

Introductions: name, how long been following Jesus, 1 expectation from time together

Topic outline / practices

Intro session material

Prayer partner assignments:

Gary & Josh
Craig & Dennis
Kathy & Mary
Gena, Stephanie & Janie

Prayer partner verbal instructions

Pray

Prayer project session 2

Objectives:

- The pattern of praying from a Psalm will begin this session.
- Participants will understand that the what and why of prayer are important pre-req for prayer.
- Participants will understand that the way in which they picture God is important to their practice of prayer.
- Participants will begin the Prayer Practices with the handout on Lectio Divina which will be discussed briefly for their practice prior to the next session.
- Verbal instructions for prayer with prayer partners will be shared.

Welcome

Psalm 34 and prayer

Session 2 material & discussion

- Prayer is... -- **How would you define prayer?**
- **Why do we pray?**
- Focus on the person of God – **How do you picture God?**
- **Do you have any questions about the printed material?**

Hand out: 1. Lectio Divina practice and 2. examples handouts

Hand out: session 3 material

Pray

Prayer project session 3

Objectives:

- Participants will continue to pray using a Psalm this week.
- Participants will share their experiences with Lectio Divina. They will reflect specifically upon how the use of Lectio enabled them to slow down their reading of Scripture in order to listen for the voice of God in prayer.
- Participants will understand that prayer is an act of faith but this faith will be contrasted to the “word of faith” teaching of such teachers as Kenneth Copeland.
- We will reinforce the understanding of prayer being connected to God as he has revealed himself to be “initiator” of the conversational relationship with himself.
- Participants will sign up for interview #1 during group.

Welcome

Psalm 131 and prayer

Discuss Lectio Divina practice experiences

Discuss Session 3 material

- Prayer is an act of faith
- Prayer is response to God who spoke first
- Prayer is a means of developing relationship with God
- God forms us through prayer in PARTNERSHIP with us
- The power of prayer doesn't rest in me – my perfect alignment of a “system”
- The power of prayer rests in God – I don't believe in prayer, I believe in God
- The focus of attention is most appropriately upon God
- Discernment is a process – ongoing dialogue, humble heart, indifferent to our wants, his answer will be consistent with Scripture, will always glorify Jesus and conform us to his image
- The uncertainties of living by faith always thrust us back into God's arms!

Hand out: S.O.A.P.S. handout – **discuss briefly**

Hand out: session 4 material

Give verbal instructions for prayer partners

Sign up for interview #1

Pray

Prayer project session 4

Objectives:

- Participants will be able to explain the S.O.A.P.S. approach to prayer and journaling through Scripture as they discuss this experience.
- Participants will discuss various “models” of prayer found in Scripture, describe the merits and identify which models they have used in the past and which might be helpful for their use in the future.
- The Prayer Practice on journaling will be handed out and discussed with an instruction to practice during the week.
- Prayer partner experiences will be discussed and how to identify a psalm to use in their prayer time.

Welcome & thank for interviews

Psalm 48 and prayer

Discuss Prayer partner expectations – for next week, read a Psalm (date + 30 to find one) and use it as part of your prayer. Pray for 15 minutes together.

Discuss S.O.A.P.S. experience

Discuss Session 4 material

- Acronym prayer
- Lord’s prayer
- Advantages & disadvantages
- Feedback

Practices:

Acronym prayer – From reading

Hand out: Journaling – **discuss briefly**

Hand out: session 5 material

Pray

Prayer project session 5

Objectives:

- Prayer partner experiences will be discussed.
- Participants will share their experiences and insights regarding the Prayer Practice of journaling.
- Participants will discuss the session material on Solitude, Silence and Fasting being able to describe the importance of these to their personal prayer lives.
- The Practices of the Jesus prayer and breath prayers will be discussed with instruction given for their practice.

Welcome

Psalm 145 -- and prayer

Discuss How did praying with prayer partner for 15 minutes go? Were you able to find a Psalm?

This week – encourage one another in the prayer practices that you're doing and Pray for 20 minutes together.

Discuss Journaling experience

Discuss Session 5 material

- Solitude & Silence
- Fasting

Practices:

Fasting – From reading

Hand out: Jesus & Breath Prayer – **discuss briefly**

Hand out: session 6 material

Pray

Prayer project session 6

Objectives:

- Participants will provide feedback regarding their practice of the Jesus prayer and / or breath prayers and how journaling was helpful in creating focus and slowing down their processing scripture and listening for God's voice.
- Participants will understand how our bodies affect and participate in the practice of prayer.
- Participants will identify how their personality affects the ways they sense they are close to God and how this plays a role in the places they feel connection with God.
- The role of various prayer postures will be discussed and their use encouraged as part of prayers of praise, repentance, lament, etc.
- Participants will briefly describe their prayer partner experiences and be encouraged to expand their prayer time together.
- The Zúme Prayer Cycle will be handed out with instructions regarding its use explained.

Welcome

Psalm 32-- and prayer

Discuss How did praying with prayer partner for 20 minutes go?

This week – encourage one another in the prayer practices that you're doing and Pray for 30 minutes together.

Discuss Journaling experience

Discuss Session 6 material

- Incarnation – being embodied creatures
- Personality and devotional / prayer life – Where is it best for you to pray?
- Posture & Prayer

Practices:

Discuss – fasting & breath prayer experience

Hand out: Zúme Prayer Cycle – **discuss briefly**

Hand out: session 7 material

Pray

Prayer project session 7

Objectives:

- Participants will discuss their Zúme prayer experiences – leaving additional time for this discussion.
- Discussion of the session material will be specifically targeting an understanding that nothing is outside the realm of “appropriate” prayers. God wants to hear it all. Various psalms of lament and discussion of words from Job will be used to support this.

Welcome

Psalm 39 -- and prayer

Discuss How did praying with prayer partner for 30 minutes go?

This week – encourage one another in the prayer practices that you’re doing and Pray for 40 minutes together.

Discuss Zúme Prayer Cycle experience

Discuss Session 7 material

- About what topic, request, theme have you ever wondered whether you should pray?
- What do you think about the cries of the Psalms & Job...are they too much (too raw, off base, etc.) for the follower of Jesus?
- How have you experienced God change you through praying even “trivial” prayers?

Practices:

Hand out: Praying Scripture handout & Thrasher material – **discuss briefly**

Hand out: session 8 material

Sign up for interview #2

Pray

Prayer project session 8

Objectives:

- Encourage listening to God while interceding for others.
- Participants will decide whether or not a prayer app is a personally useful organizational tool.
- Participants will go on a prayer walk this week as a result of the discussion.
- Participants will be encouraged to pray for friends / family not yet following Jesus.

Welcome

Psalm 16 -- and prayer

Discuss How did praying with prayer partner go this week?

This week – encourage one another in the prayer practices that you're doing. Connect for lunch, coffee or something and do that. Pray as you wish. (Concern: The more I've encouraged longer prayer times together, the less time people have actually met.)

Discuss praying scripture experience go?

Discuss Session 8 material

- Intercession – what is something new you learned about intercession?
 - Listening while interceding
 - Organizing: prayer app, paper list, how often, etc.
- Mission – what is the connection between prayer and mission?
 - ONE cards

Practices:

Hand out: Prayer walking material – **discuss briefly**. Go for a walk and pray at least once

Hand out: session 9 & Ortberg material

Pray

Prayer project session 9

Objectives:

- Participants will have an idea of what to do in the midst of difficult times.
- Participants will have a renewed appreciation for the suffering of Jesus and how that enables his identification with them.
- Participants will have understand that suffering is not inconsistent with following Jesus.

Welcome

Psalm 23 -- and prayer

Discuss How did praying with prayer partner go this week?

This week – If it's possible, I encourage you to pray the Zúme Prayer Cycle together.

Discuss Tell me about your prayer walk time. How did that go?

Discuss Session 9 material

- What reflections on the material do you have?
- Pain, illness, suffering are inevitable in life. If Jesus suffered, it's likely we will go through dark times as well.
 - What we do with our suffering is key.
- What do you think of the steps / encouragements toward prayer during difficult times?
- Ortberg material. What struck you from this chapter?
 - Do you think that God might withhold feelings of his presence?
 - The anger that can happen when the feelings of God's presence are absent.

Practices:

There will be no additional practice this week. Return to one that you found helpful.

Hand out: Prayer plan material & Barton Rule of Life session – **discuss briefly.**

Hand out: survey

Pray

Prayer project session 10

Objectives:

- Celebrate what God has done and has taught us over the weeks together
- Debrief together as a group re what we have learned together
- Express thanks to group for participating

Welcome

Psalm 90 -- and prayer

Collect surveys

Discuss Group debrief questions

- Thinking back over our sessions what pieces were most helpful in your relationship with God?
- Overall, how has your participation in this group expanded your experience in prayer?
- How do you anticipate using any of the tools you learned about in the future?

Discuss Share Prayer Plan / Rule of Life thoughts together

Discuss Any practices experiences anyone wants to share from this past week?

Thanks again!!

Pray

APPENDIX D

PRAYER PARTNER INSTRUCTIONS

Session

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 1/intro | Connect this week and just get to know each other. Coming to Jesus story. |
| 2 | Get together and share a high and a low this week. Pray together for 5 minutes |
| 3 | Connect this week and ask how prayer exercises are going. Ask how to pray for one another. Pray together for 10 minutes. |
| 4 | Read a Psalm together (18, 48, 78, 108, or 138) and use it as part of your prayer. Pray for 15 minutes together. |
| 5 | Encourage one another with regard to the individual prayer exercises you've been doing. Pray for 20 minutes together. |
| 6 | Pray for 30 minutes together. |
| 7 | Pray for 40 minutes together. |
| 8 | Pray for 50 minutes together. |
| 9 | Pray the Zúme Prayer Cycle together for an hour. |

PROJECT COVENANT

Recognizing that this group will likely be different from my previous group experiences, I acknowledge that what I get out of it will be proportional to the level of my involvement in each aspect of the group. I also understand that this group is part of an educational project that Rich is doing in order to complete his Doctor of Ministry degree and I agree to allow him to keep records of individual conversations solely for the purpose of answering research questions. I understand that no records will be shared with anyone else in the church and no names will be attached to any records in written research.

I promise:

- To attend each of the ten group sessions which will meet for one hour each on Wednesday nights at 6:30 p.m. from August 28 – October 30, 2019 with the exceptions of times I prearrange with Rich.
- To offer myself fully to the Lord with the anticipation that I am entering a time of growth and transformation as I fully engage in this group
- To prepare for each session by reading, watching or listening to provided content
- To complete the suggested exercises to expand my experiences in prayer
- To engage in discussion with other group members about the session topics and prayer experiences we undertake
- To contribute to a climate of honesty, trust and personal vulnerability in a spirit of mutual upbuilding
- To meet with another member of the group as a prayer partner once a week following the guidelines provided for those times
- To meet individually with Rich 2-3 times during the period (Aug 28 – Oct 30) for “check-in” conversations

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E

PRAYER PRACTICES SURVEY

Prayer Practices Survey

Name: _____

- How often do you pray? (E.g. 3 times a week, once a day, twice a day, many times a day)
- Do you have a set time of prayer (or a “quiet time”) you observe each day? YES NO
- How do you pray most often?
 - Silently by myself
 - Audibly by myself
 - Audibly with another person or group
 - Collectively with a church
- When do you pray? (Mark all that apply.)
 - In the morning right when I wake up
 - In the morning after getting ready for the day
 - Before meals
 - At night time right before bed
 - At different times during the day
- What is the length of time you spend praying each time you pray?
- Have you ever prayed for an hour at one time? YES NO
- What characterizes your prayers? Mark all that apply.
 - I frequently ask God for things
 - I keep a written record of my prayer requests
 - I spend time praising God when I pray
 - I ask God for his intervention in the lives of others
 - I typically feel like I’m talking to the wall when I pray
 - I spend time thanking God
 - I write out prayers and reflections on scripture in a journal
 - While praying, I feel a sense of God’s nearness
 - I spend time listening to God
 - I sometimes just sit still and don’t say anything in prayer
 - When I pray, I feel like God is far away
 - I spend time confessing specific sins when I pray
 - I sense God’s Spirit leading me to pray for certain people or events in the world
 - I frequently pray for a friend or family member who does not know Jesus that s/he would become a Jesus follower
 - I have prayed for someone to be healed and they have been healed
 - I keep a written record of God’s answers to my prayers
 - There have been times when God might be prompting me to pray about something or for someone but I have often disregarded those as weird feeling

- I typically, freely pray whenever something comes to mind that I think God and I should talk about
- Are you comfortable praying out loud with others? Mark all that apply.
 - Yes, I pray with my family
 - Yes, I pray in my Life Group with others
 - Yes, I have led prayer times in the context of a worship gathering
 - No, there is no way you could get me ever to lead prayer in a worship gathering
 - No, I am uncomfortable praying with a few others
 - No, I am uncomfortable praying with my family
- Please indicate on the scale what the content of your prayers most often pertain to:

Topic	Never	Rarely	Some	Frequently	Always
Gratitude & Thanksgiving	1	2	3	4	5
Needs of my family & Community	1	2	3	4	5
Personal guidance in crisis	1	2	3	4	5
My health & wellness	1	2	3	4	5
Confession and Forgiveness	1	2	3	4	5
Things I suddenly feel compelled/urged to pray about	1	2	3	4	5
Safety in my daily tasks or travel	1	2	3	4	5
A sense of peace	1	2	3	4	5
Blessings for meals	1	2	3	4	5
Specific requests from others	1	2	3	4	5
Concerns about the nation or government	1	2	3	4	5
Concerns about global Problems & injustices	1	2	3	4	5
My sleep	1	2	3	4	5
Reciting scripture passages, meditations or liturgies	1	2	3	4	5
Other Please specify:					

- Do you use particular prayers when you pray? Mark all that apply.
 - I pray the Lord's prayer
 - I pray other Biblical prayers
 - I pray the Psalms
 - I use an acronym (like A.C.T.S., B.L.E.S.S., etc.) when I pray
 - I pray memorized prayers
 - I use prayers of others (published in books) to aid me in praying

From whom did you learn to pray?

Please share with me anything not included in this survey that you think is important to mention about your practices of prayer.

As I develop a 10-week curriculum on the theology and practices of prayer, what areas or topics regarding prayer would you find helpful or encouraging to include?

APPENDIX F

FIGURES

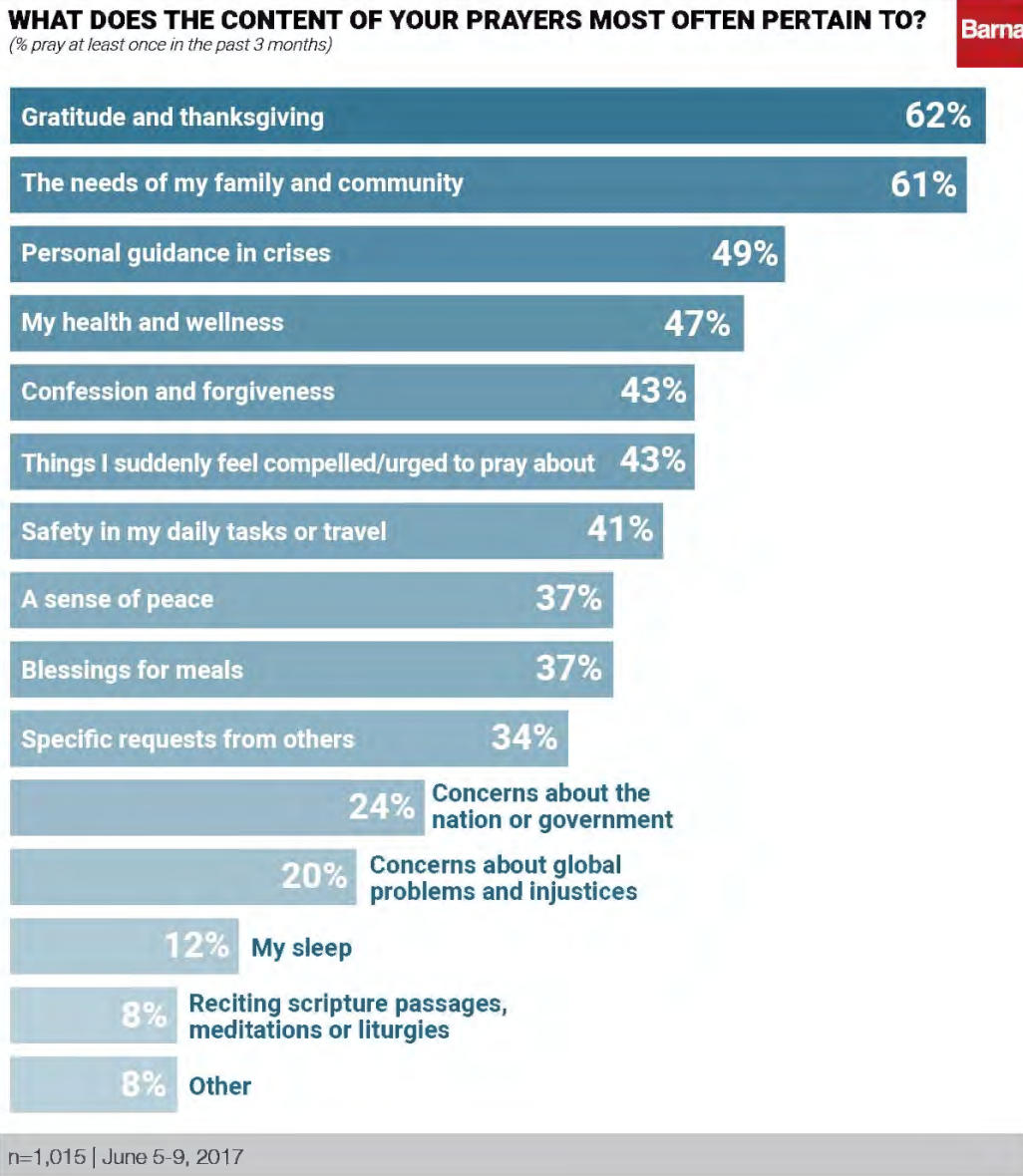


Figure 1 Barna study, “Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray”

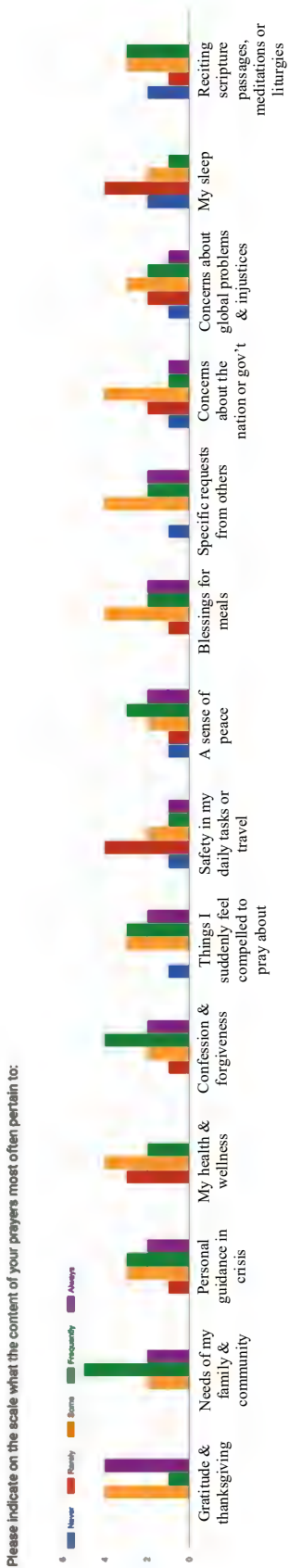


Figure 4 Pre-experience responses

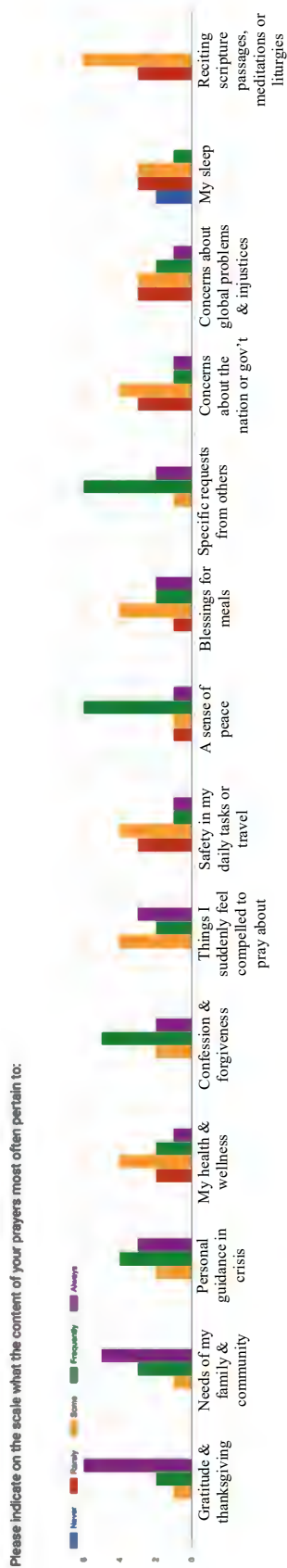


Figure 5 Post-experience responses

APPENDIX G

MID-COURSE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What feedback do you have about the group times thus far? (Helpful? Confusing?)
2. How has the workbook material been helpful or unhelpful?
3. What feedback do you have about the “prayer practice” experiences?
(Hard? Easy? Confusing?)
4. How are your connection times with your prayer partner going?
5. What’s the most important thing you are learning about prayer so far?
6. Is there anything else you’d like me to know right now about your experience?

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