

PRAYER

Group Study Guide



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Week One | T.A.C.O.S.

By Jon Lee

Opening Questions:

- Is prayer awkward to you? Why or why not?
- What do you typically find yourself praying for most often? (Out of a need for the miraculous? List of hopes and dreams? Praying for forgiveness? Praying on behalf of others? Describe what your typical prayers consist of.)

MY THOUGHTS:

Read this: Prayer is such an amazing tool that that allows us to engage closer with God, our Creator. Like the one who knows every hair on our head....like the creator of everything! What's even crazier is, the fact that God actually wants us to talk with him. He desires this close and intimate relationship where we communicate more than the 2-3 set times of day. He literally desires our attention all day.

Nicholas Herman was a French man, born in 1614. Poverty forced him into the army to assure himself of a constant meal and a small salary. It was winter when Nicholas discovered faith in Christ through a tree. Now I know that may sound strange, but scripture is full of stories of God using odd things like – frogs, donkeys, whales and even bushes. So, a tree is not beyond possibility.

As his faith grew, he left the army to join a monastery, changed his name to Brother Lawrence and committed his life to serving in the kitchen. It was among the pots and pans that he discovered a peaceful life of continual communion and prayer with God. He believed firmly that all work, all places, and indeed all life was sacred.

Going further, Lawrence said those who elevated times of corporate worship as more important or who used elaborate rituals to draw closer to God suffered from a great delusion. With words that still challenge even me today, he said this: “men invent means and methods of coming at God’s love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God’s presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?”

The idea of praying all day can feel unproductive and even cumbersome, but the practice, I promise, is neither. When Paul instructs the church in Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” he wasn’t instructing people to fall to their knees and pray without moving. He was instructing them to welcome God into everyday life!

Praying without ceasing is contemplative solitude in the presence of God, experiencing the presence of God wherever you are, during whatever it is you are doing. In other words, it’s praying and communing with God always.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18,

1. What does this passage teach us about who God is?
2. What does this passage teach us about Jesus?
3. What does this passage reveal to us about humans?
4. What does it mean to pray without ceasing?
5. Where do you find it hardest to bring this type of prayer life into action? (Work, friend groups, home, etc..)
6. If praying without ceasing means living a life that is intentionally incorporating Jesus in the monotony of “every day” life, where do you need to practice this more?

Practice: T.A.C.O.S

Now the real question is “what is a practical way to pray without ceasing?”

I don’t know if it’s just me...but often prayer can be difficult because it feels like I’m just asking God for stuff. In an attempt to mature my time with God and find a unique way to remind myself that God desires more than a laundry list of requests, many years ago I taught myself about T.A.C.O.S. This is one of my favorite ways to spend quality time with God and to help guide my time more productively with Him.

T.A.C.O.S. stands for:

Thanksgiving: What are you thankful for because of God?

- God has provided and continues to provide so much for us. Even in the times of pain and suffering, God remains faithful. Take a moment and reflect on where you can be thankful to God.

Adoration: What do you adore about God?

- This is an opportunity for you to praise God for who he innately is. His characteristics, the nature of Him, his promises to us, the most holy King of Kings exalted above all.

Confession: What do you need to confess to God?

- Confession doesn't ever get easy, but it does allow us to rely on the strength of God instead of our own will. God asks for us to release the burden of sin and give it to Jesus, but it requires you to confess it. Confession also gives someone else the permission to hold you accountable and guide you towards the light.

Others: Who can you pray for?

- It is a blessing to be able to intercede on someone else's behalf. To take their needs and place them above your own by asking a simple question. How can I be praying for you? A simple phrase and one I encourage you to use more often.

Self: What do you want to ask God for?

- Now is the time to allow Jesus to fulfill one of his many promises to us. In Romans 8:34 and 1 John 2:1 we receive a beautiful picture of Jesus interceding on our behalf. Draw near to Him and his grace. Allow him to advocate on your behalf.

Take a moment to pair off in your group and practice these with someone else.

Questions:

After everyone is finished praying, discuss the following:

- What was difficult?
- What helped you connect to God differently?
- Where can you see this helping you pray without ceasing?

Practice for the Week Ahead | T.A.C.O.S.

- This week's practice is just doing the same exact thing as we just did but by yourself.
- How can you incorporate T.A.C.O.S. into your everyday rhythm of life and refocus your prayer time with intentionality.
- You can do this in a few minutes several times throughout the day. It's up to you!

Leaders, make sure you check in throughout the week on how everyone is doing! Keep each other accountable and maybe even coordinate sometimes to hop on the phone, FaceTime, or a Zoom call to pray together.

Week Two | The Lord's Prayer

By Jacob Stewart

Opening Questions:

- What is something you have been able to implement from last week's lesson on T.A.C.O.S.?
- What's been the most awkward prayer you have been a part of?
- Growing up, when did you or your family pray together? If at all!
- Describe a win in your prayer life and describe an area you're struggling in your prayer life.

MY THOUGHTS:

Let's be real, for most of us, prayer is a weak point in our relationship with Jesus. Most of us don't really enjoy prayer. It feels like we're scrambling on what to say, how to say it, and like it has to be the most perfect thing ever to talk to our perfect God. Trust me when I say this is even a problem for pastors like me! If I could give you a glimpse into staff prayer meetings or leader meetings for my Youth team you would often discover blank stares and crickets to the question, "Who wants to pray for _____?" It's comical.

Since prayer can be so elusive, so in-between you and the invisible God, it can feel a bit overwhelming and strange. But in my opinion, it doesn't have to be. You just must be willing to take the steps and create the disciplines for this practice to become a lifeline for you.

For Jesus, prayer was central to life with God. Most people define prayer as simply, "Talking with God." In many theologians and I think Jesus' perspective though, prayer is a back & forth conversation that comes out of an in-depth relationship.

That's why prayer was such a huge part of Jesus' life. We read, "He often withdrew into lonely places & prayed." (Luke 5v16) And for Jesus, prayer wasn't a drag or a duty. He seems to genuinely enjoy his Father's company. I think that's why the disciples asked Jesus, "Teach us to pray." (Luke 11v1) Jesus' answer was "the Lord's Prayer," which isn't just a Scripture to simply memorize and recite (which

we're going to work on and use it for) but more of a template to follow when you pray. It's important to note that this is the only time in the Scriptures that we see the disciples say, "Teach us _____." Not teach us how to heal, not teach us how to preach, not teach us how to cast out demons; instead, it is "teach us to pray".

This should signal in your mind that something must have been different about Jesus' prayer life. He must have been praying in a way that seemed unique compared to what they have been brought up with as a Jew; and Jesus was the best one ever! In this time of withdrawing to lonely places, I can't imagine Jesus simply saying, "Father, bless my food that I eat. Protect my loved ones near me. Give me guidance about where to go next. Amen." If that prayer sounds familiar to you, there's a good chance you need to take a step further into what it means to not just talk to God but listen to Him as well. We will do this over the course of the next several weeks.

For now, our practice of prayer is going to start here in the Lord's Prayer. This week, we'll challenge you to set up a time & place to pray and teach you how to do it. It's an easy exercise that you can do in 2 minutes or 2 hours! The main point for us as a group is to get into a rhythm of daily prayer.

Read: Luke 11:1-13

- What does it mean to "hallow" God's name and why is this the first request in the Lord's Prayer?
- In verse 3, what is the significance of the request for daily bread, and how does this relate to our trust in God?
- How can the Lord's Prayer help us to align our hearts and minds with God's will like we see in verse 10?
- The parable Jesus uses is unique to illustrate prayer. How does this theme of persistence in prayer found in the parable relate to the Lord's Prayer?
- What does it mean to ask, seek, and knock, and how can we apply this to our own prayer lives?
- How can the Lord's Prayer be used as a model for our own prayer life?

Practice: The Lord's Prayer as Prayer

Remember, our practice for the week is to pray the Lord's Prayer as a template this week. Let's first begin with a few questions and practical ways we can establish our time of prayer. Write these things down for yourself as you work through the questions. Let's discuss:

1. When will you pray?

What's the best time of day for you? Give God your best time of your day when you are most willing and coherent enough to make it a priority!

2. Where will I pray?

Jesus had spots that worked best for him so that's probably the case for us too! Find and choose a dedicated space for prayer. A room in your home, a park, your bed, etc.

3. How should I pray?

What posture is best? Sitting, standing, laying down, walking? Try several things out first. Maybe try big, deep breaths to center yourself or take a walk first to stimulate your mind.

4. How long should I pray?

Good news, no right answer here! For me personally, it takes me about 10-15 minutes to even clear my head enough to hear from God. If I can't take 30 minutes time to pray every day, we're way too busy. Unless there is a newborn child or some other extenuating circumstances that make 30 minutes too hard, that's fine. Start where you are and take the next step. If 30 minutes is too hard without some major circumstances, I would do a big audit on your calendar and see what needs to go to make time for God!

Now, let's start with the Lord's Prayer as a template to prayer. This was used for our high schoolers in a prayer series they did in 2021 and adapted from Bridgetown Church. If our Youth can do it with success, we think you can too!

Let's start here... walk through this slowly with your group

- 1.** Put away phones or any distractions, and get into a comfortable, but alert position. Take a few deep breaths.
- 2.** Invite the Holy Spirit to come & pray the Lord's Prayer like this...
- 3.** "Our Father..."
 - a. Pause and take a moment to think about the idea of God as your Father, with good intentions towards you. If you want, imagine God, His character, think about what He looks like even and simply focus on Him & His character as Father.
- 4.** "In heaven..."
 - a. Now, take a moment to think about the idea that God is all around. As you breathe in & out, imagine yourself breathing in & out more of the Holy Spirit.
- 5.** "Hallowed (holy) is your name..."
 - a. Spend a few minutes just sitting with the Father in joyful, grateful adoration. Sit in silence for a few moments. Think of some things you're grateful for and praise God for specific things you love about him.
 - b. Challenge your group to say things out loud like ("Father, thank you for your kindness." "Father, thank you for loving me.")
- 6.** "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."
 - a. Spend a few minutes asking for God's will to be done in your life, city, church, community.
 - b. Think of specific things to pray.
 - c. One at a time, spend time as a group verbally giving to God specific things in your life that you're wrestling with control over. A simple prayer of, "Your will be done in _____," is a great place to start.
- 7.** "Give us each day our daily bread..."
 - a. Spend a few minutes praying for specific needs & wants in your life or that of your community.
 - b. This is a great time to pray over specific people in your group who need something: healing, peace, wisdom, comfort. Have a few pray specifically for those requests of others.
- 8.** "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors..."
 - a. Spend a few minutes in quiet asking God for forgiveness for specific areas in your life and releasing others to forgiveness.
- 9.** "And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."
 - a. Spend a few minutes praying against temptation in your life.
 - i. Pray against specific sins.
 - ii. Pray against any kind of evil – spiritual, human, natural, etc.
 - iii. Pray against bad things in your life or community, and for God's blessing – the divine flow of good things into your life and community.
- 10.** Close in a prayer of thanks to the Father for hearing us in prayer.

Practice for the Week Ahead | The Lord's Prayer

Praying the Lord's Prayer

- This week's practice is just doing the same exact thing as we just did but by yourself.
- You can do this in a few minutes or over an hour. It's up to you!
- Here are a few points to help you out you can choose one:

Exercise 1:

- Get out your journal, reminders app on your phone, calendar, and set a time and a place to pray that is quiet and distraction free. Could be on the way to school, before you get ready for the day, or before you go to bed.
- Set a modest goal – try daily, but if it's too much, try 3 times a week, for 10-15 minutes. Something that is challenging but doable.
- Feel free to check out the Lectio 365 App. (The best prayer app out there in my personal opinion.)

Exercise 2:

- If you struggle with distractions, you could try breathing before you start the prayer.
- Take long, deep, slow breathes. Inhale through nose, exhaust through your mouth.
- Make sure to completely power down your phone or better yet, don't even have it in the same room.
- Your mind will seize the opportunity in silence to run wild with thoughts, feelings, memories, to do's, etc. That's okay! Don't judge yourself, feel bad, give up, or worry. When you notice your mind starting to wander, recenter with breathing & saying a quick word like, "Jesus have mercy" or "Holy Spirit, come."

Leader, make sure you check in throughout the week on how everyone is doing! Keep each other accountable and maybe even coordinate sometimes to hop on the phone, FaceTime, or a Zoom call to pray together.

Week Three | Intercession

By Tomara Brown

Opening Questions:

- How did last week's exercise with the Lord's Prayer go?
- What was challenging about the exercise you chose?
- What did you learn?
- What do you think of when you hear intercessory prayer?

“Prayer for others and for the world has been called intercessory prayer. This includes the needs of family members and friends as well as opponents and even enemies. Be sure to remember to pray for individuals you meet during the day who are suffering or in difficulty. It means praying for faith for those around you who don't know Christ and especially for those who seem to be searching spiritually. It also means prayers in general for both the church and the world.” - Prayer by Timothy Keller (p. 233)

Questions:

- Is there a particular phrase from this quote that stands out to you? Why?

This quote can inspire some good introspection. It provides a great opportunity to ask ourselves questions like. Do you find it easy to pray for those who are suffering or in difficulty? Do you pray for others to know Christ? How often do you pray in general for the church and the world? What are those specific requests?

The phrase “intercessory prayer” may be unfamiliar to some Christians. Others think this kind of prayer is only for a select few who are specially anointed. I believe that all believers are called to intercede (1 Timothy 2:1 NIV.) Jesus himself showed us how to do this. His prayer for the disciples and for all believers in John 17:6-26 is one of the most powerful examples of intercession in the Bible.

Read: John 17:6-26

- What does this passage teach us about who God is?
- What does this passage teach us about Jesus?
- What does this passage reveal to us about people?
- How can I form a habit/rule of life from Jesus' example of intercessory prayer?

MY THOUGHTS:

On John 17:6-26

Before heading to His death, Jesus stops and prays for Himself, His friends and all of us who would believe in Him. If you want to know what someone thinks about God, listen to their prayers. How do they address God? Do they ask God for wealth and possessions, or for others' salvation? Do they appeal for God's intervention like they would present a business proposal or as a child petitioning their father? Do they offer praise? Do they seek forgiveness? Do they take time to listen or meditate?

In John 17, we're allowed to eavesdrop on one of Jesus' prayers. Although it is only moments before He will be betrayed, beaten and crucified, Jesus takes time to pray on behalf of His disciples. He shows His heartfelt concern, not only for the men and women He has taught for years but for those who would later hear His message, including you!

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you.” John 17:20-21

The intimacy and familiarity with which Jesus speaks to God is evident. For eternity, even before the foundation of the world, Jesus and God the Father have shared a perfect loving relationship. Through Jesus, we get to enter into Their perfect loving union.

God is not far off, and Jesus' concern for you is not distant. He prayed for you. Even today, the Son resides next to the Father, continuing to appeal on your behalf (1 John 2:1.) Today, thank God for the opportunity to enter into a completely loving relationship with Him through Jesus.

Reflection Questions:

- How are you encouraged by the fact that Jesus prayed for you?
- How can your confidence in God's love for you affect your actions, even in the face of those who hate you?

GROUP PRACTICE: How to Pray for others?

There are many ways you can go about praying for others. One way is to simply pray for their well-being, whether it be for physical healing or emotional peace. You can also pray for them to have strength in difficult times or come to know God better even if their circumstances do not change. In general, I pray these are helpful tips as you enter intercessory prayer:

- Be specific in your prayers.
- Focus on their needs, not your own.
- Be persistent in your prayers even when you don't see results right away.
- Be patient and know that God's timing is often different than our timing.
- Engage scripture as you pray -Listen and meditate; Prayer is a conversation.
- Ask God for His will to be done What additional ideas would you add in praying for others?

How do we put intercessory prayer into action? Intercessory Prayer is LOVE IN ACTION!

As a group as each person is comfortable have them share a prayer request that they would like the group to pray for today. This should be a personal request, not one for a relative or friend that needs prayer. That will come in a moment. After each request stop and pray for the request.

As each person in the group shares a request have another person to commit to pray for that request this week. Each person should only have one or two requests to be praying for in the coming week.

Now as a group each person is comfortable have them share a prayer request for someone other than themselves that they would like the group to pray for today. Once everyone has shared pray for these requests as well as a group.

Practice for the Week Ahead | Intercession

This week the practice is to commit to pray several times during the week for the request each person asked to cover.

Optionally, this can help your practice of intercession.

- Designate a notebook as your intercessory prayer book.
- Record your request(s).
- Write a prayer for each request(s) .
- Record when the request is answered.

Week Four | Listening

By Mackenzie Stephens

Opening Questions:

- What was your experience with last weeks practice of intercessory prayer?
- Have you had meaningful experiences with listening to God in prayer?
- Share a time when you feel like you heard from God.

Listening Prayer:

Prayer brings us closer to God, but listening invites God in. With the invention of the microwave and the drive-thru, we have successfully created an instant gratification culture. We can pop something into the microwave and within a few minutes, out pops something hot. The same is true for the drive-thru. We pull up, place an order, drive around the building and almost instantly we have a hot meal, made to order, just the way we want, all within a few minutes of asking for it.

Have you ever treated your prayer life the same way you do a microwave? Do you expect God to quickly respond with an answer just as soon as you place an order? Or go to bed asking God for something and then hoping that when you wake up your prayers will be answered? Have we traded the practice of being with God for the prospect of quickly getting from God?

In our study, we have been learning about prayer, but God desires so much more than to just hear and answer our requests and petitions. He is that powerful, yes, but He is not a genie. God created us to have a relationship that goes both ways. As we communicate with Him, He desires and deserves the freedom to communicate back. We have to be available and ready because sometimes it's through reading Scripture; but other times it is not until we intentionally slow down and hold still to hear from Him.

In 1 Kings 18 we have the story of Elijah and how he faces down 450 prophets for the god Baal in a showdown with the one true God. It is a story of amazing faith and success by Elijah. Chapter 19 starts

with the queen whose prophets lost to Elijah promising to have him killed for what he has done. Verse 3 of chapter says that “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” as he ran we get this story:

Read: I Kings 19: 9-13b

- What does this passage teach us about who God is?
- What does this passage reveal to us about Elijah?
- What can I do to better model this type of prayer?

MY THOUGHTS:

Oh, to hear God speak like a windstorm! How incredible it would be for His voice to boom in an earthquake! Sit in the imagery of this passage for a moment. God told Elijah to go out of the cave and He revealed His strengths through all these powerful, destructive forces. How do you think Elijah felt in the face of a windstorm, earthquake, and fire? After the noise and emotion of experiencing all three destructive forces, in the stillness, God whispered. And Elijah covered his face. You're Elijah: why now, in this calm, are you covering your face?

Elijah wasn't on a mountain top or at the beach. He was in a cave hiding. This wasn't even a moment when Elijah had his life together. If we look at this passage in context, we see that this was at one of Elijah's lowest moments. Even after experiencing God sending down fire from heaven to consume the burnt offering on Mt. Carmel to defeat Baal's prophets, just one chapter before, Elijah is now hiding in a cave afraid for his life and dealing with depression. God showed up and revealed His power, loudly and publicly. And here we also find Him in the stillness with Elijah. Not with a pep talk or commanding orders, but a gentle whisper, speaking to Elijah where he's at.

If we look to Psalms 23, a well-known passage that could be too quickly passed over because of our familiarity with it, but this time try reading it slowly and visualize the scene.

Psalm 23:1-3a says:

The Lord is my shepherd, I will not be in need.
He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul;

Some translations say that God led David beside “still” waters. Where it was quiet and peaceful. A place where he could be refreshed and contemplate without distraction. It was not by the rapids or fast-moving water. David met God in a quiet place where he could be unhurried and focused. A place that he could draw deeply from safe waters and be restored. The same is available for us. God wants us to find a place where we can be still and without distraction, where He can communicate with us, just like He did with David.

Scripture repeatedly tells us that God was with David. Why? Because David was with God. God wants to be with you too, but He’s not in the business of forcing Himself upon you or intruding upon your schedule. He’s not going to kick in the door and invade your life. It is your responsibility to make time to allow Him to communicate with you.

We need to take time and evaluate honestly questions like: When was the last time you slowed down? Do you regularly give God room to speak to you? Room in your heart and mind? Room in your schedule? Some say that it is easier to find God on a beach or in the mountains, but we can’t all be there every day. So, how do we find Him in the ordinary and mundane rhythms of life?

Prayer as a monologue is religiously flat. Prayer was created to be a dialogue. We speak and God speaks. The problem is, we don’t wait. By the time He speaks, we are already done. We are quick to ask and quick to move on. We don’t often sit long enough to listen or mediate. We don’t give Him time to speak in return. We have habits and commitments for things that take from us: like our time, energy, resources, emotions, even our mental health, but we don’t set aside regular time for the One that gives us what we need most.

GROUP PRACTICE:

As a group try sitting in silence for two minutes. No music, no talking, no distractions. Someone set a two-minute timer, so no one is distracted by keeping track of the time. Close your eyes, slow your breathing. Work on being present. It may feel awkward but try it.

Then discuss with your group how that felt.

If time allows, set another timer for 5 minutes and disperse to different rooms and try this again. Quiet your mind and say, "Here I am, Lord" and begin the practice of listening. If your mind begins to wonder, re-center your mind and say again, "Here I am, Lord". Keep in mind though that if you are not used to hearing God speak to you, it might be through a seemingly random thought that comes to your mind. Don't dismiss it, consider it. Does someone come to mind that might need prayer? Are you thinking of a sin you need to repent of? Or a feeling you need to confess to God? At the end of five minutes, come back together and discuss your experience. Did God reveal anything that you would be willing to share with the group?

Thoughts for creating a posture of listening:

This practice requires discipline, especially at first, but if you keep working at it, it can grow into a desire that you crave and a habit that quenches your soul.

Muslims pray 5 times a day all their life...It's a lifestyle.

Jews pray 3 times a day all of their life...It's a lifestyle.

It doesn't matter if they're happy or not.

It doesn't matter if they're blessed or not.

Even when they're sad, they pray, they just do it. Prayer is a lifestyle.

How many times a day do we commit to pray? How much time do we spend listening?

Prayer and LISTENING MUST BECOME A LIFESTYLE (Rhythm).

The goal this week is to find pockets of time where you can start to listen to God and proactively rest in Him. Our lives are ordinary, so how do we fit in the extraordinary?

One idea is to tell God what you are thankful for when you wake up instead of reaching for your electronics to check headlines or social media first thing in the morning. Begin the day by inviting Him to go with you.

While making a pot of coffee or in the shower you can intentionally focus your mind on Jesus or pray for others before tackling your to-do list.

On your way to work, instead of listening to morning shows or music, try listening to a sermon, worship or even sit in silence and see what He might bring to your mind. Imagine if He were sitting in the passenger seat next to you. What would He tell you?

Maybe you can go for a quick walk or sit outside for a minute to calm your mind. Even between meetings, you can just take thirty seconds and intentionally breathe. Empty your mind and breathe. Say a quick prayer while you walk down the hall. It's ok, you can even take Jesus into the restroom.

An example of a posture to emulate can be found in Psalms 63:1-8.

If you have children, what a great time to train them in these habits with you. They can practice communing and listening to God with you. As they are getting ready for bed, they can tell God one thing that they are thankful for and then go to sleep thinking about that blessing. Or, in the car, you can listen together to an audio Bible or Bible story or worship music. Ask God to speak to each of you on your way to dropping them off at school.

What is one way that you can try to quiet your hurried and busy mind and to be present with Jesus today? When can you find one minute to count your blessings? One minute to praise God and thank Him for His goodness? Try listening for a few minutes after your prayers and petitions this week. Ask Him to reveal Himself through the Scripture you read. We all have the same "twenty fours" in a day, how much of that time do you want to be in God's presence?

Question:

What creative ideas do you have to make space to implement listening prayer?

Practice for the Week Ahead | Listening Prayer

1. Take two minutes of complete silence.
2. Continue by asking Jesus to silence all other voices in the room, so that you can only hear the voice of the Father. Specifically ask Jesus to silence the voice of our enemy and any demonic forces. Also, ask Jesus to quiet any of the distracting thoughts in your mind.
3. Begin with forgiveness. Ask the Father to bring to mind anything you don't feel forgiven for. If there is anything, imagine taking it to the cross and leaving it there. Then ask the Father if there is anyone you need to forgive. If there is, imagine releasing this person and any offenses.
4. Invite God to bring to mind what he wants to address. Perhaps explore some of these prompts:
 - Is there anything I believe about myself that is not true? What does the Father want to replace it with?
 - Ask the Father if there are any other things that he want to speak to you about.
5. When the Father brings something to mind, ask some follow up questions:
 - What do you want me to know about this?
 - Is there anything else? (Don't be afraid to wait longer and just enjoy the time of stillness in the presence of the Father.)
6. Here are a couple common frustrations when doing listening prayer:
 - What if you ask God to speak and there is nothing or you see just blackness in your mind's eye? If this is the case then ask the Father, "What do you want me to know about this?" Perhaps the blackness is an invitation into peace or rest. Press in and wait in his presence.
 - What if it's really hard to focus? Ask the Father, "What do you want me to know about this?" And remember that this is a Practice, it can take some time.
 - If you are not hearing anything, ask the Father if there is a Scripture that He wants to bring to mind.
7. Remember that, overall, this is a time to be deepening your relationship with the Father. Maybe this is just a time to relax with the God and receive his love.

Week Five | Guided Prayer

By Melinda Gividen

Opening Questions:

- How did the practice of listening prayer go from last week?
- What did you learn?
- What do you pray for when you are not sure what to pray for?
- What do you do when you feel stuck in prayer?

MY THOUGHTS:

So many of us operate under an assumption that our communication with God is supposed to be formal, exquisite, and perfect. In reality, most of our communication with God is messy and discombobulated. It's often in our moments of crying out to Him in desperation that we realize how much we grow by simply remaining transparent and vulnerable. It can feel refreshing to hear that our prayer list can be both casual and structured at the same time. Guided prayer is just one method of praying that makes this possible. Guided prayer keeps us focused and removes distractions from our minds and hearts as we work to connect with God.

Guided prayer is based on scripture, and it's based on the way that Jesus taught His disciples to pray. It offers us the chance to celebrate, to reflect, and to mourn when we need to. Through time of silence, reflection, and listening for God's voice, you have an opportunity to turn your attention to Him, trust Him wholeheartedly, and begin letting go of any worries and fears that are keeping you stuck.

Speaking of feeling stuck....that's not a fun feeling is it? We've all walked through moments or situations or conversations in life when we just weren't sure which way to go, or maybe we weren't sure if we wanted to go any of the directions or options that were in front of us.

Discussion Questions:

- Share about a time when you faced a situation or a moment where you just didn't know what to do?
- How did you handle that?
- How did you lean on God during that time of uncertainty?

The great thing about guided prayer is that it's a tool for us to use during any moment of life, but it's particularly helpful when we feel stuck and we really need clarity on what God is trying to say to us. Let's look at a passage of scripture together and see what this looks like.

Scripture:

As you listen to this scripture being read out loud, spend two minutes in silence thinking about the words you heard and what you think God might be saying to you through them.

(Group Leader: read this passage out loud now)

“Some wandered in the wilderness,
lost and homeless.
Hungry and thirsty,
they nearly died.
“Lord, help!” they cried in their trouble,
and he rescued them from their distress.
He led them straight to safety,
to a city where they could live.
Let them praise the Lord for his great love
and for the wonderful things he has done for them.”

Psalm 107:4-8 NLT

Personal reflection time:

What does this passage teach me about God or Jesus?

Let's look at the passage again, but this time read them out loud together as a group.

(Before you begin, have someone in the group pray and specifically ask God to listen to you as you read these words to Him.)

Personal reflection time:

What does this teach me about people?

Read the passage a third time, this time silently and to yourself. On a piece of paper, write down what you think God is asking you to do with these words.

Personal (written) reflection time:

Take some time and write out what can you do this week to apply what you've learned from this passage?

Prayer Time:

What do you need to tell God about how this passage impacted you?

If you're not sure where to start, pray these words as a group:

God, I know my ways are not better than yours.
When I don't know what to do, I feel tired and unsure.
Sometimes I think my only options are worry and fear.
I need your help.
Give me strength to call out to you.
Remind me that your strength is all I need.
Thank you for loving us.
Amen.

Reflection

Sometimes we forget how powerful it is to simply pray by reading scripture. If you notice the prayer at the end of our scripture time, it's based on the words we read. In Psalm 107, we are reminded of how God often uses trials in our lives to teach us how to trust Him more. Asking God for His help is often one of the most difficult things to do, yet it almost always strengthens our relationship with Him.

There are four components of the passage we read:

1. A problem (they are lost, wandering around the wilderness)
2. A prayer (they cried out "Lord, help")
3. A provision (He led them to safety)
4. A praise (they acknowledge the good He has done)

Now, I realize it would certainly be nice if every situation in life worked out just that perfectly - we hit a roadblock, we pray, He answers, we worship Him. There's no guarantee of that happening every time, but what if we believed it was possible, each and every time. How could that impact our prayer life? How could that impact our relationship with God and our reliance on Him?

Discussion Questions:

- Why is it hard for us to turn to prayer when we are faced with a situation that we don't know how to handle?
- Have you ever read scripture as a prayer to God? How does it feel to do that? What would help make it feel more comfortable?
- What was the most effective way for you to connect with this passage - listening, reading out loud, or reading silently? All are important at different times!

GROUP PRACTICE:

Choose a section of the Bible that your group will commit to reading before your next meeting. (We might suggest choosing several Psalms). Decide how you can offer accountability to each other in practicing the guided prayer you learned today. Consider writing down your daily thoughts as a way of tracking your prayer time and bring these notes to your next meeting.

Practice for the Week Ahead | Guided Prayer

Use the Psalms or scriptures that your group chose and see where you find the following.

1. A problem
2. A prayer
3. A provision
4. A praise

Note that for each Psalm, as you go through the week re-read them and see if new you have new insights.

Week Six | Unanswered Prayer

By Rich Cottrell

Opening Questions:

- How did last week's practice of guided prayer go?
- What is something that you learned?
- Have you ever been stood up for an appointment, meeting or date?
- What emotions did you feel when you realized the other person was not going to show up?

There can be a big difference between being disappointed in a person and disappointed with God. When we feel like God is not answering our prayers it can lead to big disappointment and frustration. For some of us, we feel that we are not supposed to be frustrated or disappointed with God which means then talking about an unanswered prayer can be difficult. I have often heard that God answers prayer in one of three ways, **Yes**, **No**, and **Not Yet** and while this is not completely untrue it is not all that helpful for dealing with an request we have left at the feet of the King of the universe and yet seems to be ignored. It gets worse when we start taking scripture out of context like John 15:7 that says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Or Hebrews 11:6 "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." We can start to wonder if we are failing in our faith when the quick read of scripture seems to say we should always get answers.

Question:

- What is the difference between the feeling of someone missing a meeting with you and an unanswered prayer to God?

Read:

John 14:12-14 says "I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father. Yes, ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it!"

Question:

- How could this verse be easily taken out of context?
- How do you define “in Jesus’s name”?

Often when we hear verses like this it can lead to disappointment or disillusionment when we do not feel like we are getting the results of our prayer. Or worst of all shame because we do not get the results that Jesus says we should which can make us feel like the problem.

I would like to put forward a list from much smarter theologians than myself of some possible reasons for unanswered prayer. In the moment when we feel like God is not listening it can be hard to see the reason why, in retrospect we often have a much different perspective. This list is not exhaustive and may not be the helpful in the moment, but it is still worth considering for those difficult times when God does not seem present in our circumstances. Unanswered prayer hurts. Use this list as a conversation starter for possible reasons for unanswered prayer.

Discuss with your group.

Why isn't my prayer working?	What can I do about it?
Dumb Sometimes what I pray for is just dumb, meaningless, or illogical.	 Consider praying in a different way or just doing something practical yourself.
Laws of Nature We ask for things that contradict the laws of nature. Now God can and does perform miracles, but they are the exception not the rule for how he often answers prayer.	Matt 8:23-27 Don't stop praying. God can and does do miracles over the natural order. Remember God may be protecting others by saying "no" to you.
Doctrine Our doctrine is wrong. By that I mean that we have a faulty understanding of who God is and what he wants for us.	1 Tim 4:16 Talk to someone sensible about the thing you're asking God to do. Have them help you discern if this prayer reflects God's character and His promises in the Bible.
Free Will God will not override someone's free will and at the same time our free will does not make God a hostage to our prayers.	Gen 2:16, John 7:17 Pray for small steps, remember that God can influence situations.

<p>Contradiction</p> <p>My prayers may contradict others' prayers. For every prayer we lift up that the red or blue team will win, the other side has prayers going up to match ours.</p>	<p>Remember that in saying "no" to you God may be blessing someone else.</p>
<p>We don't ask</p> <p>Often our disappointment is due to unanswered expectations we had of God and not an actual unanswered prayer.</p>	<p>James 4:2b</p> <p>Ask God. He wants to hear from you. Make sure to ask him continually.</p>
<p>Patience</p> <p>Sometimes God is working gradually on His timetable: not ours. Or we give up too quickly.</p>	<p>Luke 18:1-8</p> <p>Find a way to keep praying.</p>
<p>Sin</p> <p>We need to deal with the sin in our lives. It is not that God abandons us when we sin or can't help us when we do, but sometimes He wants us to deal with the issues in our own lives before he is ready to move us to what he has next for us.</p>	<p>1 Peter 3:2, James 5:16</p> <p>Confess your sins ask for help to walk free from both God and your community. Make sure there is no one you need to make amends to because of your behavior.</p>
<p>Faith</p> <p>Sometimes we just don't believe God can do what we are asking and we don't persist in asking.</p>	<p>Could you start small and work up to this? Intentionally develop your faith by reading scripture, praying, fasting. Not so that God will answer your prayer but so that your faith can grow.</p>
<p>Motive</p> <p>We ask with wrong motivations.</p>	<p>1 Samuel 16:7</p> <p>Be honest with God in your conversation about how much you want what you are asking for. Ask him to help you be open to his answer.</p>
<p>Fallen World</p> <p>Am I expecting God to exempt me from the consequences of my sin or the sin of others. Or just ignoring the fact that we live in a fallen world?</p>	<p>John 16:33, Romans 12:12, 1 Peter 4:12-13</p> <p>Talk with God and your community. Try to discern if this is a consequence of a fallen world, if God is wanting you to pray against it, or grace to navigate the difficulty.</p>
<p>God Himself</p> <p>Sometime God himself is the greater answer to our prayers.</p>	<p>The main point of prayer is not getting what you want from God, but God himself.</p>

Disclaimer:

This list can be helpful for personally examining possible reasons why a prayer may not be answered. The list is not exhaustive and can be a hindrance when we wrongly ascribe one of these reasons to another person's unanswered prayer.

MY THOUGHTS:

Cancer has been a part of my family's story now for the last several decades. After graduating college and landing my first career job I moved up to Louisville. Before I had lived in my new apartment for an entire year, I got a hard phone call. It was my dad letting me know that the doctor had found something on some tests, and it wasn't good. Two months later I would be standing at his grave side with a lot of unanswered prayers with a grieving widow who had just lost her husband of 33 years. Ten years later and just one month after marrying my wife I would get a similar phone call. This time from my mother letting me know that the doctors had found cancer and expected her to live eight months. We spent a lot of time on the road to visit my mom over the next few months. During those months praying for healing for her was difficult because of my experience of losing my father. We did pray during that time, we prayed that doctors would find something good, but they did not. We prayed that pain would go away, but it did not. We prayed that a miracle would happen, but nature took its course. A lot of people prayed, and I prayed a lot and yet I found myself at a graveside once again.

I recall the night I sat quietly at my friend's house the morning I got the phone call that my father had passed away. I had just delivered the news to them. There was an awkward silence as a very uncomfortable quiet settled on the room. Until a friend came over and sat next to me, looked me in the eye and said, "you are not alone." I don't recall anything else he said to me in that moment, but I will never forget those four words. "You are not alone." All too often when I have had times where I feel like God is not answering my prayers or is silent, I start to question. I question if God is good, if he is distant or if he can intervene in our circumstances or if God even cares about those circumstances. Then I am reminded of the parallel in the loss of my earthly father to Jesus. Jesus was God with us. Jesus is God's reminder to us that we are not alone.

Question:

- Have you had an experience with unanswered prayer. Share that if you are comfortable doing so.

Read Matthew 26:36-46

- What do you learn from Jesus's unanswered prayer?

Jesus does not guarantee us a life free of troubles. We all have troubles, the ones we cause ourselves or the ones visited on us by seeming chance. Jesus never says, "follow me to an easy life", rather he sometimes calls us to difficult places, but always offers to walk with us while we are there.

Unanswered prayer for me has a lot to do with the control we all crave and the power we believe we should have over our own circumstances. Often unanswered prayers can be a painful gift that reminds us that our efforts and our ability or our control are never going to be enough to quench that longing in our hearts. We need something, someone outside of ourselves to place our trust.

One important thing I want to conclude with; unanswered prayer for me has primarily become problematic because as John Ortberg puts it, "I have wanted the merits of Jesus rather than becoming a disciple of the way of Jesus." Or in layman's terms, prayer has become more focused on me and the results I want rather than my relationship and obedience to Jesus. God is always calling us to deeper levels of trusting in him, not a blind faith. God wants us to develop a faith that can stand on both answered prayers and on unanswered prayers and confidently say "I know that Jesus and his way is better, and I trust in him". When prayer goes unanswered we must realize the truth, we are not alone and we are more loved than we know.

Practice for the Week Ahead | Unanswered Prayer

Three exercises that are helpful to learn how to deal with unanswered prayer it is engaging in lament. Pick one, or do all three, depending on your week and what you feel you're emotionally up for:

Exercise 1: Praying the lament psalms.

- Pick out a lament psalm and use it as a “liturgy” to give voice to your prayers.
- Here's some great examples: Psalm 10, 13, 60, 79, or 80.
- Don't just read/pray it and move on. Sit in the discomfort and let God comfort you. Don't be scared to feel, even to feel deeply, and to meet God in that emotional pain.

Exercise 2: Writing your own lament psalm.

- Get out a journal or scrap of paper and write your own lament psalm.
- Remember: prayer isn't a place to be good; it's a place to be honest. God already knows what's in your heart! And nobody else has to ever see this. Just write out all your dreams, doubts, hopes, fears, questions, confusion, disillusionment, disappointment, etc.
- Then pray your lament psalm to God.

Exercise 3: Journaling

- Get a journal if you don't already have one.
- Make a list of unanswered prayers in your life.
- Go over each one, just hovering for a moment, and see if the Spirit stirs anything in your heart.
- Write out how it feels to live with unanswered prayer. It's helpful to write your journal to God, like a letter, just getting everything off your chest.

Note: Again, feel free to just pick one of the three exercises.

Week Seven | Unceasing Prayer

By Kari Clark

Opening Questions:

- How did praying through some laments help you wrestle with unanswered prayer?
- What are some ways you have been able to create helpful rhythms of prayer in your life?
- Where is it challenging for you to pray regularly?

MY THOUGHTS:

My story starts 28 years ago at the kitchen sink, staring out the window elbow deep in dishes and crying...overwhelmed with 2 babies under the age of 2. Desperately needing that “alone” time with God and NEVER being able to find it...maybe you can relate to that...not necessarily the baby part but being so overwhelmed with “life” that you feel like you have no time to engage in deep, thoughtful, prayer...I cried out to God...“when”... “how”...

He responded...”Pray without ceasing”.

”Pray when you”...

- Do the dishes...pray that I will cleanse your home from impurities.
- Do the laundry...pray that I will clothe your family in righteousness.
- Bathe the babies...pray that they will be washed by the blood of Christ and that they will know the Lord as their savior.
- Paying the household bills...pray that you will be a good steward of our resources.
- Managing my time as a stay-at-home mom...pray that you will put Jesus first and that you will practice biblical principles that your children will follow.
- Taking the kids to school...pray that they would find favor in the eyes of the people in authority over them and that they would be a good witness for Christ.

As the years past He continued to prompt me through different emotions of fear, grief, loss, anger, deep hurt, betrayal.

Questions:

- What emotions prompt you to consider prayer?
- What emotions do you wish prompted you to prayer and why?

As the years past He continued to prompt me through different seasons.

- New ministry opportunities.
- Children transitioning through major life changes, critically ill, middle school, high school, Empty nest.
- Ups and downs in marriage.
- Elderly parents.
- Working outside the home for the first time in 28 years.

Questions:

- Are there types of seasons where it is easy for you to pray?
- Why is it hard in some seasons to make space for prayer?

Nobody taught me how to pray, I didn't read a book or any of the above-mentioned things. Life circumstances drove me to prayer. I was desperate to see God move in my circumstances. My prayers weren't perfectly worded or eloquent. My prayers were raw, emotional, and real. I made everything a prayer. From simple tasks to my deepest most personal heartaches or triumphs. To learn how to pray you just have to start the conversation with God. Just start praying and then don't stop.

Begin where you are. I was a young believer; I wasn't raised in church and my knowledge of scripture was limited. I didn't know how to pray. My only exposure to prayer was when I spent the night at my grandmother's house and she would pray "now I lay me down to sleep, I pray to the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray to the Lord my soul to take." Quite honestly, that always scared me and didn't satisfy my desire to have a meaningful exchange with Jesus, but it was a starting point. You don't have to have a wealth of knowledge or know how to pray through scripture. Begin where you are, He will meet you there.

Read: Ephesians 6:10-18

Reflection Questions:

- What does this passage teach us about who God is?
- What does this passage teach us about Jesus?
- What does this passage reveal to us about people?
- What can I do to better model this type of prayer?

Twenty-eight years ago, as I was standing at my kitchen sink overwhelmed with the need to be in the presence of the Lord and feeling very much like I needed to be in some “holy” quiet, designated space to achieve that, I realized, that He is with me always and that I could have a conversation with Him any time I needed to. I could have that conversation ALL OF THE TIME WITHOUT CEASING. So I did, and it changed my life. More recently I was begging for Him to answer a prayer that I have been praying for 28 years. Read that again... and let that fall on you...28 years, with no answer. I realized that I didn't have to be in a special church service or seek others to intervene on my behalf or even beg. He is with me all of the time. He sees me. He hears me and he is working in the waiting. So I trust Him and it will change my life yet again.

Be honest with God. He knows it all anyway. Don't hold back, He can handle it. As I began to pray continually, I became bolder in my prayers. I stopped being afraid to tell Him how I really felt. As I saw Him respond and answer, we became best friends. I talk to Him about EVERYTHING. I started sharing my secrets with Him. It changed my life. I had never had a safe place before. I could rail and scream and cry and tell him how angry I was. He responded in love. I could share how hurt and afraid I was. He responded in love. I could pour out my heart. His responses always came from a place of Love, even when I needed to be corrected, I never felt condemned. He responded in love. I was safe with Him. It changed my life.

You learn to pray by praying. You can't learn to do it by reading a book. You can't learn to do it by listening to a podcast. You can't learn to do it by listening to a sermon on prayer...You can't learn how to pray by reading this lesson. Continue the conversation all day long- I never say “amen.” I just tell him, “I'll be back in a few.” Every time my daughter is home and she gets a hold of my phone, she loses it a bit because I have practically every app that I have installed on my phone running in the background. She fusses and proceeds to give me a speech on the reasons that it isn't good as she closes them all down. That's the way I pray...I have all the “apps” running in the background and all the “tabs” open in my mind, so I can jump right back in as needed...It may be bad for your battery life on your phone or the speed on your computer but it's the opposite for your prayer life. It doesn't drain your battery, slow you down or stress you out. It fills you up. It gives you hope. It changes your life.

Questions:

- What practices from this study of prayer have been most helpful or impactful for you and why?
- What areas of prayer would you like to grow in?

GROUP PRACTICE:

As a group, each person writes down several emotions they would like to identify as prayer triggers.

Then have each person write down several situations they would like to become triggers for prayer.

Share your list with the group.

Practice for the Week Ahead | Praying Continually

Each person should use their lists of emotions and situations they hope to trigger prayer and commit to praying when they encounter them. Next time in the group start your time by sharing how it went and what you learned.

