

# LEADER GUIDE

first methodist mansfield



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**MANSFIELD**

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# An Invitation to Pray

God has invited us into a relationship. God's great invitation is one of salvation, extended to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This relationship is grounded in faith, which is trust and allegiance and loyalty. We become bound to God through faith by trusting in Jesus. What God has done in and through Jesus is a stupendous and unparalleled work of grace.

But God has extended to us another grace. Karl Barth wrote, "Prayer is a grace, an offer of God." It is not only the case that God has redeemed us in Christ and opened the possibility of relationship. In addition, God has given us the means of growing in fellowship with him. We can know God and grow in knowledge, intimacy, and trust through routinely entering God's presence in prayer. Prayer is encounter, and conversation. Prayer is speaking and listening. Prayer is abiding with as well as a springboard for action. The mature Christian life is rooted and grounded in prayer.

## *Longing to Grow in Prayer*

In this study, we will learn what it means to talk with God. We will be guided by key questions that concern the what, why, how, when, where, and wherefore of prayer. We want to understand prayer as conversation, relationship, presence, and continued abiding with Christ. We want to discover how prayer leads to intimacy with God, and as we draw near to God, we learn both how to pray and how to be obedient to the calling of Christ in the world.

Beyond technique on how to pray, we also want to grasp that prayer is personal and dynamic. The greatest gift we receive through prayer is God. While there are many benefits that can come through prayer, the great mystery of prayer is the gift of communion. The experience of fellowship with God through prayer leads to the desire to grow in prayer, to become holy, to be increasingly transformed into the likeness of Jesus. Together we hope to take a first step or a next step. We long to grow in prayer because we long to grow in our relationship with God.

## *Learning to Pray Through Scripture*

Christians believe that God reveals himself to us in and through Scripture. Our prayer life should be shaped by the Bible. While serving as a group leader, you will be responsible for focusing the group upon the theme for each session, inviting everyone to listen carefully to a passage, facilitating thoughtful and respectful discussion about the Scripture, and assisting the group in discerning how God is leading you to engage more fully in conversation through prayer.

## STEP ONE MAPPING THE TERRITORY

As the group gathers, call everyone together, pray and ask God to increase your love for him, to guide your discussion, and to lead you to a place of increased faithfulness in prayer. Life change can be rapid and exponential as well as slow and incremental. Trust God is working. As you begin, clearly communicate the focus of the session so that your group is of one heart and mind, moving forward in the same direction *together*.

## STEP TWO EXPLORING THE TEXT THROUGH SCRIPTURE

During this portion, the group will view a video teaching prepared by Pastor David Alexander and read a passage or passages from the Scriptures. During this portion the group with David Alexander and read a passage or passages from the Scriptures. Pastor David provides helpful context and theological insight into the theme each week. The video portions are introductory, not exhaustive. The video teachings are designed to intensify your group's focus on the theme and to become acclimated to the world of the Bible. But the group's most significant steps forward will occur in reading and responding to the Bible together. Whether you appoint a single reader or share the reading responsibilities, make sure you read the passage aloud. Listen attentively to your brother or sister who is willing to read. Listen also for God's voice.

## STEPS THREE AND FOUR BIBLE STUDY HELPS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The next two steps in each session work together in tandem. How do these two steps complement one another?

The *Bible Study Helps* direct your attention to terms, nuances, or ideas that are worthy of the group's energy and focus. The *Helps* also assist you in understanding and interpreting the text faithfully. The *Questions for Discussion* foster Bible application and contextualize the passage within the overall message of Scripture. During each session, participants should be introduced to new insight and challenged to live faithfully to God. Strive for both.

In designing the *Helps* and *Questions for Discussion* I have kept the following four questions in mind, and I would encourage you to use them when leading discussion. These questions represent one reliable method for studying the Bible that can lead to sound understanding and life-transformation. The questions are:

- First, **What does the Scripture say?** The first step in understanding the Bible is **observation**. Who, what, when, where, why, and how are all worth asking, as each question helps the reader identify key characters, chronology, and points of conflict or concern. Additionally, entering the text and unearthing how it may have been received by the first hearers is indispensable for understanding the Scripture.
- Second, **What does it mean?** Once you have sorted out all the facts, move forward with **interpretation**. What do key terms or central actions suggest to us about God, human beings, and where the two intersect?
- Third, **How does it work?** Make an **application**. We are called to live according to God's story. How is the text calling you to be faithful?
- Lastly, **How does it fit?** Studying a particular verse, chapter, or book should lead us to **correlation**. How does this text illuminate the great themes of the Bible?

The *Bible Study Helps* and Pastor David's video teaching will help you answer these questions. Our goal is for group participants to learn more about the appointed passage for each session, but also to gain skill in studying and discussing

any passage of the Bible. Introducing these questions and utilizing them effectively will equip those in your group to read the Scripture with confidence not only during your session, but in personal study.

As your group makes **observations**, offers **interpretation**, and begins to **apply** the Scripture, one of the *Questions for Discussion* might complement or deepen the conversation. Familiarize yourself with the questions, and if one connects with a thought or theme introduced by a member of your group, incorporate that question. Do not feel pressure to discuss every question that is provided. Rather, talk about the questions you believe will be most helpful for your group and try to deploy them in a timely and conversational manner. The questions may not have one "right" answer. Instead, think of them as tools to help you engage with God and one another, furthering a discovery process for living more faithfully to the calling of Christ.

Lastly, the First 15 and the weekend worship services of First Methodist Mansfield will also focus on prayer. Reading the daily devotional and being in worship will expand your knowledge base and enrich your discussion.

## STEP FIVE PRACTICING PRAYER

As you have listened to one another, Pastor David, the Scripture, and to God, your group should clearly perceive where the Word of God is challenging you to grow in your relationship with God through prayer. As a leader, revisit the focus for the session, review insights that emerged during discussion, and help the group to identify specific life-applications to remember and put into practice. You may want to write these down so that your group can revisit your discoveries. You may also want to share what you have learned with your pastors.

Once you discern points of application, the group is sent forth to their homes, families, workplaces, and everyday routines. Pray together before you go forth, and then pray for one another until you meet again.

Do not just tell one another goodbye. Send one another into the world as messengers of Christ.

### *Living Life as a Friend of God*

One of the key themes in this study that we will extract from Scripture is the notion that in Jesus Christ we have been given the gift of friendship with God. Our friends are people we want to be with. We want to experience life with them. We listen to them. They listen to us. And we partner together. The friendship is enriched through shared experiences. There is joy and delight. And while human relationships provide all these things, God has begun a friendship with us that will extend through all eternity. We begin experiencing the depths of that friendship in prayer. We begin growing into the people God is calling us to become forever.

Let's take a next step together. I will be praying for you. If you would like me to pray for you by name, email me: [bas@benjaminasimpson.com](mailto:bas@benjaminasimpson.com).

May God bless you and your group as you grow in your friendship with God. May your prayer life increase in depth, and your love for God exponentially grow.

Benjamin A. Simpson  
Ordinary Time, 2017

# Session One

## What is Prayer?

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### STEP ONE: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

Some of our greatest leaps in knowledge result from taking something familiar, breaking it down, and revisiting what it is and how it works. It doesn't matter whether you are a novice or very advanced. This process broadens our understanding of a given thing, whether it be in the arts, athletics, the sciences, culture, or even faith. When something becomes familiar and assumed we lose touch with its grandiosity and magnitude. Even our dearly held beliefs and common practices can become so ho-hum that we lose touch with what makes them wonderful. That is a fact.

Prayer is no exception. For most, prayer isn't a new concept. But nevertheless, prayer remains a mystery. In this study, we want to examine prayer, revisit the Scriptures, and reassess not only what we know but what we've missed and forgotten about prayer. We want to put what we discover into practice and grow into the people God is calling us to become. Through prayer we experience intimacy with God, a knowledge of his grace, guidance in personal and social holiness, and growth in Christlikeness. It's vital.

As you open the session, begin with a word of welcome and prayer. Then, map the territory for your group. Clarify where you are and where you are going. Introduce your group to this study.

**Ask your group our key question for session one: What is prayer?**

Patently wait for people in the group to speak up. Don't rush past this first question. Give it time.

## Focus

**WHAT IS PRAYER? TOGETHER WE WANT TO EXPLORE THE IDEA THAT PRAYER IS GOD'S WAY OF BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH US. PRAYER IS COMMUNICATION, INVOLVING BOTH SPEAKING AND LISTENING, AND IT IS PERSONAL, RELATIONAL, AND DYNAMIC.**

God has spoken to us in the Bible, and as we have been reminded all year, we come to know Christ more fully through knowledge of the Scriptures. In this session, we will look at a conversation between God and Abram. We will see how prayer is a personal, dynamic exchange. We will also see that while prayer involves our needs and wants, it isn't merely about voicing our requests. Prayer is about relationship because God is about relationship.

Prayer is about knowing God and being known by God. That's good news. Talking with God is a gift, not only for a special few, but for all of us.

### STEP TWO: EXPLORING THE TEXT THROUGH SCRIPTURE

#### VIDEO TEACHING: SESSION ONE

WWW.FIRSTMETHODISTMANSFIELD.ORG/TALKINGWITHGOD

Say, "We will begin with a message from Pastor David where he introduces the study. He will also direct us to a few key concepts that are vitally important for our understanding and practice of prayer."

Pastor David's key teachings are:

- Prayer is relational.
- God is relational and desires relationship with us.
- Prayer is personal and dynamic.

**Play Pastor David's video teaching.**

#### READ THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

GENESIS 15:1-21

After the video concludes, invite the group to open their Bibles to Genesis 15:1-21. You may want to invite two or three individuals to read.

Some people are hesitant to read the Bible aloud. Do not pressure anyone to read who does not want to. Invite participation from everyone and create a loving environment where the practice of reading the Bible aloud is possible. Your group may be the first place an individual learns how to read and share God's Word given in Scripture.

Remind everyone that God is revealed in Scripture. Gently urge your readers to read with reverence for God and love toward the group. Additionally, gently urge those who listen to do so with ears that are attentive to their brother or sister who reads and also to the voice of God, who may speak a fresh word. Invite everyone to come to the reading with a teachable heart and an anticipation resulting from confidence in God's Word.

### STEP THREE: BIBLE STUDY HELPS

Say, "Keeping in mind what we have learned from Pastor David, let's examine our Scripture reading for this session. What observations can we make about the passage that will help us understand what is taking place?"

You may offer the following:

- Notice that in Genesis 15:1 God's first word to Abram is personal. God is Abram's protector ("I am your shield") and his portion or prize ("your very great reward"). Abram is assured that God is with him relationally.
- In Genesis 12:1-9 God calls Abram to leave his home country and follow God's leading to a new place. God also promises to make Abram into a great nation. But his wife Sarai is barren and they are both in old age. In Genesis 15:2-3, Abram states a dilemma. God has promised to establish a people from Abram's descendants, yet he does not have a son.
- Notice that in Genesis 15:4-5 God assures Abram he will have an heir. God also gives Abram a visual reminder. As a nomad, Abram would see the stars every night.
- In Genesis 15:6 we are told Abram "believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness." Abram has faith that God will fulfill his promise. This verse becomes foundational in the Bible for the notion that faith is central for right relationship with God.
- Genesis 15:7-21 is an account of God making a covenant with Abram. God does so in terms that would be familiar and understandable to Abram. There are sacrifices and terms. What is unique is that God is the only one to "pass through" the animal pieces with fire. God is saying, "I will keep this promise of land and descendants, I will be the one to uphold it."



# Session Two

## Why should I Pray?

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### STEP ONE: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

**P**rayer is communication with God. But why should we do it?

Our motivations are important. Somewhere along the way we learned God answers prayer, so we pray for answers. We were told prayer can lead to inner peace, so we pray for peace. We heard prayer changes things, so we pray for change.

But none of these are the primary reason we should pray.

We should pray because through prayer we grow in our relationship with God. God is the most important reason we should pray.

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord. And our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Through prayer we learn to rest in God. That we pray is important. How we pray matters. But why we pray is foundational. God doesn’t only respond to our words, but to our hearts.

The Psalms teach us that prayer is a response. They also teach us that God is worthy of our response through prayer. Eugene Peterson writes:

*The Psalms come from a people who hear God speak to them and realize that it is the most important word they will ever hear spoken. They decide to respond. They answer. . . . The Hebrews prayed. They were intelligent and passionate before God. They knew that God had invaded their history. They knew themselves addressed by God. They responded to the presence; they answered the address; they prayed. (Answering God, 14-15)*

It is helpful to remember that God has spoken to us first. God has done great things. Prayer is our answer. By answering we learn about God, ourselves, and God’s calling upon our lives.

As you open the session, begin with a word of welcome and prayer.

Ask your group our key question for session two: **Why should we pray?** Give this question some time.

## Focus

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WHY SHOULD WE PRAY? TOGETHER WE WANT TO EXPLORE THE IDEA THAT IT IS THROUGH PRAYER WE GROW IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. THIS IS WORTH OUR TIME AND ATTENTION BECAUSE GOD IS GOOD.

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Encourage your group to be open about their struggles with prayer. But most importantly, help them to discover that our primary motivation in prayer is fellowship with God.

### STEP TWO: EXPLORING THE TEXT THROUGH SCRIPTURE

#### VIDEO TEACHING: SESSION TWO

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Say, “Keeping in mind our conversation thus far, let’s turn our attention to a message from Pastor David as he directs us to a few key concepts that are important for us concerning why we pray.”

Pastor David’s key teachings are:

- God’s self is the most important thing God gives to us through prayer. By talking with God, we get to know God.
- A relationship with God through prayer requires an investment of time and attention. God is worth our time and attention.
- False ideas and assumptions about prayer can undermine your efforts. Support one another in pushing beyond common struggles.

Play Pastor David’s video teaching.

#### READ THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

PSALM 145

After the video concludes, invite the group to open their Bibles to Psalm 145. Designate one person to read the entire passage. In discussion, focus on Psalm 145:1-7.

### STEP THREE: BIBLE STUDY HELPS

Say, “Keeping in mind what we have learned from Pastor David, let’s examine our Scripture reading for this session. What observations can we make about the passage that will help us understand what is taking place?”

You may offer the following:

- This is a psalm of praise. It is attributed to King David. It may be helpful to take a moment and outline who David was.
- The Psalms have long been used as the prayer book of God’s people. The Psalms teach us to pray and why we pray.
- In Psalm 145:1, David says he will “exalt” God, which means to speak highly of or hold in high esteem. God is also identified as “my God the King,” suggesting the relationship is personal and positional: David is God’s vassal, citizen, subject, and servant. God is the sovereign ruler.
- Psalm 145:3 says the Lord is “worthy of praise” because God’s greatness cannot be fathomed.
- Psalm 145:4 suggests that God’s actions for humankind are worth telling to your children and grandchildren.
- Psalm 145:4-7 says that people will speak about God through the ages because of God’s “mighty acts,” “glorious splendor of majesty,” “wonderful works,” “power of...awesome works,” “great deeds,” “abundant goodness,” and “righteousness.” Notice that God has been revealed to David and to Israel by speaking and through the display of character through action. God’s praiseworthiness is not an abstraction for Israel: God has made his praiseworthiness concrete.
- The responses to God in this psalm are: “I will exalt,” “I will praise,” “they tell,” “they speak,” “I will meditate,” “I will proclaim,” and “they celebrate...and joyfully sing.”



# Session Three

## How do I Pray?

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### STEP ONE: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

Prayer is communication with God that involves speaking and listening. We pray because God is good, and God is worthy of our time and attention. As a result, time with God in prayer leads to a closer relationship with him and a transformed life. So how do we pray?

You may already have an answer to this question. I hope that you've practiced prayer since this study began, and long before! But we all have room to grow. We have many examples in Scripture that can help us take a next step, but none more important than the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples. This prayer has been handed down to us. It is a reliable guide for how to pray. These words teach us about God's person and character, and as we pray these words we grow in our relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Concerning the Lord's Prayer, theologian Karl Barth writes:

*"The Lord's Prayer is not just any form of prayer to be used by just anybody. It presupposes "us:" "Our Father!" It addresses a Father who is a father to us in a most particular fashion. This "us" is created by the order that Jesus gave to follow him. It implies the communion of all humanity praying with Jesus Christ, our existence in the fellowship of the children of God. Jesus Christ invites, permits, commands us to join him, especially in his intercession with the Father. Jesus Christ invites, commands us, and allows us to speak with him to God, to pray with him his own prayer, to be united with him in the Lord's Prayer. Therefore he invites us to adore God, pray to God, and praise God with one mouth and one soul, with him, united to him."*

In the Lord's Prayer we join our voices with one another and with Jesus Christ.

As you open the session, begin with a word of welcome and prayer.

**Ask your group our key question for session three: How do we pray?**

Patience wait for people in the group to speak up. Give it time.

## Focus

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HOW DO WE PRAY? TOGETHER WE WANT TO EXPLORE THE LORD'S PRAYER AND DISCOVER WHAT IT TEACHES US ABOUT HOW WE TALK WITH GOD.

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### STEP TWO: EXPLORING THE TEXT THROUGH SCRIPTURE

#### VIDEO TEACHING: SESSION THREE

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Say, "Keeping in mind our conversation thus far concerning how we pray, let's turn our attention to a message from Pastor David where he will direct us to a few key ideas that are important for us in talking with God."

Pastor David's key teachings are:

- Growth in prayer takes time. Be patient with yourself and with God.
- The disciples asked Jesus how to pray, which is an encouragement to us. We can ask, too.
- Jesus teaches us how to pray with a model prayer.
- Jesus, in his person and example, reveals to us God's character and ways, and Jesus' model prayer provides insight into who God is.
- Jesus continues to teach us to pray as we join our prayer to his.

Play Pastor David's video teaching.

#### READ THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

MATTHEW 6:9-13

After the video concludes, invite the group to open their Bibles to Matthew 6:9-13. Encourage one person to read.

Some people are hesitant to read the Bible aloud. Do not pressure anyone to read who does not want to. Your group may be the first place an individual learns how to read and share God's Word given in Scripture.

Remind everyone that God is revealed in Scripture. Invite everyone to come to the reading with a teachable heart and an anticipation resulting from confidence in God's Word.

### STEP THREE: BIBLE STUDY HELPS

Say, "Keeping in mind what we have learned from Pastor David, let's examine our Scripture reading for this session. What **observations** can we make about the passage that will help us understand what is taking place?"

You may offer the following:

- The Lord's Prayer begins with a personal address, "Our Father." This address in Matthew 6:9 suggests that through faith in Jesus we do in fact become children of God (John 1:12). It also suggests we do not pray alone--we are part of the community of Christ-followers.
- "Hallowed be your name" is a declaration and a petition. God's name is holy, yet we also pray that God's name would be regarded as holy, just like it should be.
- Heaven is the place where God's will and word are done. On earth, it is not always so. Thus, we pray that the kingdom would come on earth, and that conditions here would be made like it is in God's realm (Matthew 6:10).
- Matthew 6:11 is a petition for God to meet our most basic need for daily sustenance. In the first century meat was a luxury, but bread and water were necessary for life.
- The request for forgiveness in Matthew 6:12 is followed by a statement that we forgive as the people of God. Receiving and extending forgiveness are both an evidence of the life of God in us.
- Matthew 6:13 instructs us to ask for God's protection in temptation and trial. We also are told to ask for deliverance from evil, or the evil one. A broader biblical theology would suggest we are asking for protection from the devil or Satan. Confessing our need for protection reminds us of the frailty of human life, the power of sin, and our need of God's grace.



# Session Four

## What do I Pray About?

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### STEP ONE: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

In prayer there are times we wonder what we are supposed to say. We think of prayer as formulaic or magical, believing that if we just get the words right then the outcome is guaranteed.

But this isn't how prayer works. Prayer is communication between persons. We speak and listen in prayer. But there is also communion, which encompasses the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and presence. God has invited us into intimate communion through the person and work of Jesus Christ, who has not only called us to talk with him as disciples, but as friends.

Dallas Willard writes:

*“Sometimes today it seems that our personal relationship with God is treated as no more than a mere arrangement or understanding that Jesus and his Father have about us. Our personal relationship then only means that each believer has his or her own unique account in heaven, which allows them to draw on the merits of Christ to pay their sin bills. Or possibly it means that God’s general providence for his creation is adequate to provide for each person.*

*But who does not think there should be much more to a personal relationship than that? A mere benefactor, however powerful, kind and thoughtful, is not the same thing as a friend. Jesus says, “I have called you friends” (John 15:15) and “Look, I am with you every minute, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20, paraphrase; cf. Hebrews 13:5-6).”*

Prayer is part of friendship with God.

As you open the session, begin with a word of welcome and prayer. Ask your group our key question for session four: What do we pray about?

Patently wait for people in the group to speak up. Give it time.

## Focus

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WHAT DO WE PRAY ABOUT? HOW PRAYER CAN INVOLVE ANY CONCERN OR QUESTION WE MIGHT HAVE. PRAYER IS GROUNDED IN COMMUNION, OR OUR PRESENCE WITH GOD AND GOD’S PRESENCE WITH US. NOTHING IS OFF LIMITS IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. PRAYER CAN INVOLVE SPEAKING AND LISTENING, BUT IT CAN ALSO INVOLVE ABIDING IN GOD’S LOVING EMBRACE AND LIVING OUTWARD FROM THAT COMMUNION.

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### STEP TWO: EXPLORING THE TEXT THROUGH SCRIPTURE

## VIDEO TEACHING: SESSION FOUR

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Say, “Keeping in mind our conversation thus far let’s turn our attention to a message from Pastor David where he will direct us to a few key concepts that are vitally important for us in practicing prayer.”

Pastor David’s key teachings are:

- Prayer is relational and includes asking questions, making statements, gaining self-knowledge in God’s presence, and listening to God’s voice. What you speak with God about in prayer will be derived uniquely from your life.
- God honors an honest and sincere heart in prayer.
- Our words may be important in prayer, but so is our heart, mind, spirit, and attentiveness to God during both good times and bad.
- Prayer includes the practice of presence with God. While prayer involves speaking and listening, it can also involve silently welcoming God’s embrace.

Play Pastor David’s video teaching.

## READ THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

After the video concludes, invite the group to open their Bibles to Philippians 4:4-9. Appoint one person to read.

Some people are hesitant to read the Bible aloud. Do not pressure anyone to read who does not want to. Invite participation from everyone and create a loving environment where the practice of reading the Bible aloud is possible.

Remind everyone that God is revealed in Scripture. Invite everyone to come to the reading with a teachable heart and an anticipation resulting from confidence in God’s Word.

### STEP THREE: BIBLE STUDY HELPS

Say, “Keeping in mind what we have learned from Pastor David, let’s examine our Scripture reading for this session. What observations can we make about the passage that will help us understand what is taking place?”

You may offer the following:

- This Scripture passage comes from a letter Paul wrote to the church at Philippi. One of its great themes is joy in the Christian life. Paul wrote this letter while under house arrest in Rome.
- In Philippians 4:4-5 Paul cites two outward expressions that flow from presence or closeness with Jesus Christ: rejoicing and gentleness.
- Verses 6 and 7 present a contrast: anxiousness and peace. Notice that in this instance “the peace of God” is something we can experience in every situation, even in circumstances that cause anxiety.
- Paul writes we are not to be anxious “about anything” but “in every situation...present your requests to God.” Nothing is off limits in prayer.
- Anxiety disorders cause real challenges for many people, and one way God helps us when these conditions are diagnosed is through the wise counsel of good physicians.

- Verses 4 to 7 suggest the peace of God is grounded in our confidence that God is present. God guards those aspects of our being that lead us to experience anxiety and worry--our emotions and thoughts.
- Our thinking is important for spiritual formation. Paul writes in verse 8 that we should dwell on that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

After making your observations, **interpret** the passage. This passage offers us several important truths, including: (1) the gospel opens the possibility for us to rejoice in the Lord always, in triumph and trial, (2) gentleness should be evident in those who have drawn near to Christ, (3) If the Lord is near, we have nothing to be anxious about, (4) in situations where we may feel anxious we can ask God for help “by prayer and petition,” (5) our requests are to be presented “with thanksgiving,” which includes giving thanks for what we have been given as well as for what we hope to receive, (6) the peace of God can guard our hearts and minds against that which leads to worry and anxiety, (7) we should think about our thinking and dwell on that which is good, and (8) learning from a Christ-like example is a first step; putting what we learn into practice evidences maturity.

## STEP FOUR: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Incorporate the following questions when helpful and appropriate:

- 1 Does the idea of prayer as “sitting or resting” in God’s presence broaden your understanding and practice of prayer?
- 2 How does prayer open us up to receiving “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding?”
- 3 Consider Philippians 4:6. What does this verse teach us concerning what we pray about?
- 4 What is it about the gospel of and about Jesus Christ that makes it possible for us to “rejoice in the Lord always?” What do we uniquely have in our relationship with Jesus that can lead us to a deep gladness and peace in every circumstance?
- 5 How does Paul’s assurance that God is near help us in prayer? How does this increase our confidence that God is present and hears our prayers?
- 6 Romans 8:26-27 says, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” How do these verses connect with our passage in Philippians? How does this passage help us rely on God’s guidance in prayer?

## STEP FIVE: PRACTICING PRAYER

Thomas Merton offered this prayer:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.*

*I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

*And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.*

*I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

*Amen.*

Merton’s prayer captures the simple truth that wherever we go and whatever we do, God is always with us. Our challenge is to draw near to God’s nearness in prayer.

Ask the group, “What have we learned in our conversation and from this passage of Scripture? How is God calling us to live differently in light of this text?” Make note of your discoveries. Challenge one another.

Four applications to consider:

1. When you are anxious turn to God in prayer.
2. Present your requests with thanksgiving. Recall the good things God has done and offer thanks and praise. Trust that God will answer your prayer according to what is best. God is always working for our good.
3. Have faith always that “The Lord is near.”
4. Practice prayer as “sitting with” God.

Send one another forth to put these things into practice. **Share your prayer requests, and conclude your time together with a word of prayer.**

## NOTES:

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# Session Five

## When and Where do I Pray?

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### STEP ONE: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

We have been on a journey. We have learned that prayer is communication with God that helps us grow in our relationship with God. We have seen that we learn how to pray by asking Jesus to teach us and by following his example as given in the Lord's Prayer. Paul has taught us that we can pray anywhere and about anything, and that God is near to us and hears our requests. Now, we turn to the question of when and where we pray.

In life we pick up numerous ideas about when, where, and how we pray. But as Pastor David Alexander says, "Prayer is not so much a posture of the body, but a posture of your heart." While there is wisdom in rising early and beginning your day with prayer (which we affirm), we are instructed by Paul to "pray continually" in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

Learning how to pray involves eliminating distractions, tossing out false beliefs about God, and cultivating a spirit of prayer throughout your day. As in our close relationships, it is good to set aside time for conversation, intimacy, and attention. But beyond these moments of intimacy, such as when we are engaged in work or play, we know that our loved ones are never far from our thoughts. We call or text to keep in touch.

Prayer is similar, with the difference being that the Lord is always near. By cultivating a spirit of prayer, we learn to live in fellowship with God. We draw upon the Lord for peace, courage, wisdom, and strength. We join with God and God joins with us as a friend and co-laborer, and we seek to glorify God in thought, word, deed, and in whatever we do (1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:17).

As you open the session, begin with a word of welcome and prayer.

**Ask your group our key question for session five: When and where do we pray?**

Patiently wait for people in the group to share. Give it time.

## Focus

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WHEN AND WHERE DO WE PRAY? TOGETHER WE WILL AFFIRM THAT THERE IS WISDOM IN HAVING A ROUTINE PRAYER PRACTICE AS WELL AS CULTIVATING A SPIRIT OF PRAYER THROUGHOUT THE MOMENTS OF OUR DAY.

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### STEP TWO: EXPLORING THE TEXT THROUGH SCRIPTURE

#### VIDEO TEACHING: SESSION FIVE

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Say, "Keeping in mind our conversation thus far let's turn our attention to a message from Pastor David where he will direct us to a few key concepts that are vitally important for us in practicing prayer."

Pastor David's key teachings are:

- Prayer is a posture of the heart.
- By following the example of Jesus and setting our hearts upon God we are able to discern what is truly meaningful about each moment of life.
- Beginning each day with God in prayer impacts the remainder of our day.
- Reducing and eliminating distractions helps us set our hearts upon the Lord.
- Setting boundaries and limits will help us intentionally focus on God through prayer.

Play Pastor David's video teaching.

#### READ THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

PSALM 119:145-152, LUKE 5:15-16, LUKE 18:1-8, AND 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

After the video concludes, invite the group to open their Bibles to the above passages. You may want to invite two or three individuals to read.

Some people are hesitant to read the Bible aloud. Do not pressure anyone to read who does not want to. Invite participation from everyone and create a loving environment where the practice of reading the Bible aloud is possible.

Remind everyone that God is revealed in Scripture. Invite everyone to come to the reading with a teachable heart and an anticipation resulting from confidence in God's Word.

### STEP THREE: BIBLE STUDY HELPS

Say, "Keeping in mind what we have learned from Pastor David, let's examine our Scripture readings for this session. What observations can we make about the passages that will help us understand what is taking place?"

Take the readings one at a time. You may offer the following:

- Observe that in Psalm 119:145-152, the psalmist says that he rises before dawn to cry for help and he meditates on God's promises at night. The psalmist is mindful of God throughout the day.
- One of the most oft-cited reasons for not designating time for prayer and Bible reading is busyness or the lack of time. In Luke 5:15-16 we see Jesus had many demands on him, yet he withdrew to be alone, pray, and fellowship with God. Jesus eliminated distractions so that he could focus on his calling before God.
- In Luke 18:1 we are told that Jesus tells this parable to show the disciples "they should always pray and not give up." God calls us to persist in prayer.
- Notice that Luke 18:7 indicates a contrast. The unjust judge is one way, but God is another way. God hears our persistent prayers and responds.
- Luke 18:8 contains a question, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" The Son of Man is a title for the Messiah. Jesus is asking if this kind of persistent faith will be found among his followers. It is a direct challenge.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:17 is sandwiched between commands to rejoice and to always give thanks. To pray continually is difficult if we think of prayer as being limited to a "quiet time," but it is possible if we remember that prayer also includes remaining present with God as you go about life.



# Session Six

## How do I Grow in My Prayer Life?

### STEP ONE: MAPPING THE TERRITORY

Great things are often begun with enthusiasm, but brought to completion through endurance. Prayer is this kind of journey. We find that God can be known and desires to be in fellowship with us. We are struck by wonder. We begin, however small our first step. But then we enter trial or suffering. We get distracted or become tired.

This shouldn't surprise us. Relationships are like that. We start fast and then lose touch. Even our closest relationships ebb and flow. Exciting moments and new developments are followed by lulls and routine. But what we find as the years pass is that the effort given to sustaining the relationship, the daily tending, brings great reward. The constancy of companionship bears fruit. Abiding yields abundance. We find that we are different because of the commitment to journey with one another, and the daily relationship has incrementally changed us, developing our character.

This is true in human relationships, but even more true in our relationship with God. Catherine of Sienna said, "You, eternal Trinity, are a deep sea. The more I enter you, the more I discover, and the more I discover, the more I seek you." Prayer is a lifelong journey. God's wonders are unfathomable. Once we have glimpsed that, we can endure setbacks, valleys, and even felt distance, knowing that any obstacle endured with God will yield a relationship that is even deeper and more profound.

Having begun, how do we grow? The answer is through daily practice and commitment. Growth comes through abiding with Christ, and plumbing the depths of the mystery that Christ lives in you. The Holy Spirit is working in your life, and that the Father has called you his own.

As you open the session, begin with a word of welcome and prayer.

**Ask your group our key question for session six: *How do we grow in our prayer life?***

Patently wait for people in the group to speak up. Give it time.

## Focus

**HOW DO WE GROW IN OUR PRAYER LIFE? TOGETHER WE WILL EXPLORE HOW WE GROW THROUGH ABIDING IN CHRIST AND DAILY WALKING IN FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM.**

Prayer is not a religious activity but a relational activity which reorients our hearts toward God and fosters our growth in holiness.

### STEP TWO: EXPLORING THE TEXT THROUGH SCRIPTURE

#### VIDEO TEACHING: SESSION SIX WWW.FIRSTMETHODISTMANSFIELD.ORG/TALKINGWITHGOD

Say, "Keeping in mind our conversation thus far let's turn our attention to a message from Pastor David where he will direct us to a few key concepts that are important for our growth in prayer."

Pastor David's key teachings are:

- Prayer is very challenging, which is why growth in prayer can have an incredible result.
- Prayer involves "the mind-boggling reality that the creator and sustainer of all living things is seeking out a personal relationship with the feebleness and frailty that is your life and mine."
- God has brought us into relationship through Christ. In prayer, we discover "the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." There is always more to learn and more to marvel us.
- Christ lives in us.

Play Pastor David's video teaching.

### READ THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

JOHN 15:12-17 AND 1 JOHN 5:14-15

After the video concludes, invite the group to open their Bibles to the passages above. You may want to invite two or three individuals to read.

Some people are hesitant to read the Bible aloud. Do not pressure anyone to read who does not want to. Invite participation from everyone and create a loving environment where the practice of reading the Bible aloud is possible.

Remind everyone that God is revealed in Scripture. Invite everyone to come to the reading with a teachable heart and an anticipation resulting from confidence in God's Word.

### STEP THREE: BIBLE STUDY HELPS

Say, "Keeping in mind what we have learned from Pastor David, let's examine our Scripture readings for this session. What observations can we make about the passages that will help us understand what is taking place?"

You may offer the following:

- John 15 is part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse," his final words to his disciples before he is arrested, put on trial, and executed. Jesus is equipping his followers for what is to come.
- For context you may want to point your group to John 15:1-11. Jesus tells us to abide in him. Abiding means "dwelling with." We rely on Jesus for spiritual power, healing, and "daily bread." As we spend time with Jesus, we learn more about God's character, more concerning how to pray, and how we are called to grow.
- In John 15:12, Jesus says that love among the disciples is a command, not an option, and that our love is to be like Christ's love for us.
- John 15:13 tells us the character of Christlike love: it is sacrificial.
- Friendship with Jesus is evidenced by obedience to his commands (John 15:14).
- Jesus says that his disciples were formerly servants, but now he calls them friends. One aspect of friendship with God is insight into God's kingdom business (John 15:15).
- John 15:16 says Jesus "chose us".
- God has appointed us to bear fruit that will last.

- When we petition the Father through prayer “in Jesus’ name” God will act according to our requests (John 15:16).
- 1 John 5:14-15 tells us that we may ask anything of God with boldness, that God hears us, and will grant our requests if they are in alignment with God’s will.

After making your observations, interpret the passage. This passage offers us several important truths, including: (1) Jesus’ command to love one another as he has loved us includes the act of praying for one another, for Jesus prayed for his disciples and continues to intercede for us (John 17, Luke 22:32, Romans 8:38), (2) we may ask for anything in the name of Jesus Christ, which includes that which is in accordance with the person and character of Christ, (3) a result of prayerfully abiding with Jesus is “bearing fruit;” this includes peacemaking, forgiving those who sin against us, sharing the good news of salvation, doing good, being generous, etc., (4) we can be bold in our requests, and (5) through prayer we learn to submit to God’s will.

## STEP FOUR: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Incorporate the following questions when helpful and appropriate:

- 1 As a group, reflect on Jesus calling his disciples “*friends*.” What does this mean for our prayer life? How does this encourage us? How does this challenge us in our everyday discipleship?
- 2 What do we do when we experience distance or a time of wilderness in our relationship with God? What resources do we have that will help us endure these seasons?
- 3 How does abiding with Jesus help us to grow in our prayer life and in overall Christian maturity?
- 4 What does it mean to make a request “*in Jesus’ name*” or according to God’s will? How do we learn how to make requests that are honoring to Christ and in line with God’s way of action in the world? How do the Scriptures help us in this regard?
- 5 What is the result of growing in holiness? How does prayer help us to become holy? What “fruit that will last” can we expect to see in one another as we grow in our relationship with God? How do we encourage one another to grow into the fullness of Christ?
- 6 Do you have a story of answered prayer? Share this story with your group to encourage them to grow in their relationship with God.

## STEP FIVE: PRACTICING PRAYER

In *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, Timothy J. Keller offers a nautical metaphor to help Christians evaluate the state of their prayer life. He tells those he counsels to imagine their soul is a boat with oars and a sail. Then, he asks whether they are sailing, rowing, drifting, or sinking.

To sail means “*God is real to your heart*.” You feel God’s love, see prayer answered, and are attuned to God’s activity. To row means God might seem distant, but you stick with your holy habits like Bible reading, prayer, and worship. To drift means neglect of spiritual disciplines, and movement away from God toward self-centeredness. And to sink is as bad as it sounds, as you have given up altogether.

While sailing is preferable, Dr. Keller advises “*pray no matter what. Praying is rowing, and sometimes it is like rowing in the dark—you won’t feel that you are making any progress at all. Yet you are, and when the winds rise again, and they surely will, you will sail again before them.*”

As long as you are rowing, you’re growing. The wind will eventually pick up, and you’ll cover even more ground than before, all because of God’s grace.

Ask the group, “**What have we learned from the Scripture and our conversation today? What has God taught us in this study?**” Make note of your discoveries. Challenge one another.

Four applications to consider:

1. Be bold in prayer.
2. Make requests to God “in Jesus’ name.” Ask yourself, “How would Jesus pray in my circumstances if he were me, living my life?”
3. One way we grow is through trusting God. Have faith that God’s will can be trusted even when we lack the perspective to understand why things turn out as they do.
4. Commit yourself to journeying through life with God in prayer. Ask God to teach you what it means that Christ lives in you.

Send one another forth to put these things into practice. **Share your prayer requests, and conclude your time together with a word of prayer.**

## NOTES:

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