



A Faith Journey Resource

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Invitation to a Journey of Prayer

A Sixty-Minute Small Group Experience

Purpose and Benefit

Dr. Bill Kim of Korea declared in a message at Amsterdam that “Prayer does not need proof – it needs practice!” I am confident that Dr. Kim is right. Further, I believe that a life that lacks power is a life lacking in powerful prayer.

Convinced that good intentions for regular prayer has no power, only practiced prayer, this resource is provided to launch people into an experience of prayer. Through constant communication with God in prayer we experience more power, greater calm and joy each day. As the wonderful preacher Barbara Brown Taylor once said, the greatest gift we get in prayer is God.

Prayer is the most powerful tool available for the Christian to transform the present moment. Circumstances of present financial resources, relationship dynamics with family members and friends and other real concerns may not change immediately. What changes immediately is the knowledge that we are no longer alone. In prayer, we claim the promise of God’s presence and God’s love for us.

Process

God intends that we experience life together. As we gather with others in a small faith community, we support, encourage, and care for one another. Fellowship with others helps us experience God’s real presence. Fellowship with others also declares that no one has to make the journey of life alone.

Jesus shared life with twelve men. His practice is an invitation for us to do the same. It is generally agreed that smaller is better when participating with others for growth in faith. Once a group becomes larger than twelve people, someone will stop participating at a meaningful level. Usually it will be the quieter member. Think prayerfully of no less than two and no more than eleven people who will share this sixty-minute experience with you.

Each group member will read this resource and answer all the questions alone before the group gathers. When the group gathers, have someone read the opening prayer at the top of the Reflection Guide. Everyone else will close their eyes for the prayer. Following the opening prayer, each person, in turn, will share their answer to the questions. Take one question at a time, allowing all to share, before moving to the next question. Give permission that not everyone has to answer some or all the questions. Make this experience a safe one for quieter people.

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Reflection: The Journey to a Deeper Life with God

“One becomes a practicing Christian by practicing prayer.”
Simon Chan

The goal of the Christian life is not self-improvement or moral perfection. Nor is the goal to produce more saints. The goal of the Christian life is union with God. Some churches state it this way: Our chief goal in life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. To “glorify” anything other than ourselves is to pay attention to something other than ourselves. Central to the Christian faith is the conviction that as we glorify God, our enjoyment of God increases. As our enjoyment of God increases, we pay less and less attention to ourselves, less and less attention to our own wants and needs. We move closer to the life experience of the Apostle Paul who writes in Philippians that he has learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance. The secret is union with God in the person of Jesus.

This goal of the Christian life is realized when we engage in faith practices. What we do and say every day shapes us. We are formed each day by the decisions we make. Intentional faith practices are how we make our home in Christ, rather than in the world. They are lifestyle routines that keep us on track in living into the life and character of Jesus. When any of us self-identify as “Christians,” what we are saying is that we desire to be “a little Christ.” It is only by integrating the life practices of Jesus into a larger pattern of our own living that we become “as Christ.”

Prayer is the primary practice of the Christian life. As Simon Chan writes, one becomes a practicing Christian by practicing prayer. Prayer is the one foundational practice that all other faith practices depend. It is an acknowledgement of God’s presence and our desire to have a relationship with God. Prayer changes us and it changes God. Prayer changes us by directing us from self-reliance to trust in God and aligning our life with God’s purposes. Prayer does not change the nature of God but does change how God will direct God’s power. A wonderful example of this is in the eighteenth chapter of Jeremiah where God says clearly that if the people of Israel change their behavior, then God will change what He had planned for them.

Anyone who takes prayer seriously will eventually encounter difficulty. The causes of difficulty are numerous and it is not my intention to address more than a few here. In my ministry, I have noticed the number one difficulty is that people

approach prayer like God is a big genie up in heaven ready to grant any wish or desire that we may have. God is more there for me than I am for Him. This is an infantile level of prayer. It isn't about building a relationship with God at all. I imagine that such prayers result in God feeling used; and a relationship abused! If our desires go unmet, our prayers not answered as we expect, it is then that we stop praying. When the great giver doesn't give, we stop asking.

Another difficulty is what one early church leader called "The Dark Night of the Soul." This is often a period following some progress in Christian growth. As with any progress such as weight loss, we become addicted to positive movement forward. If that movement forward seems to stall, we are discouraged. Our expectation is continued progress and, if measurable improvement is absent, we call it failure. Enthusiasm gives way to discouragement. It is easy to give up. Growth in the Christian life has such periods when progress seems to elude us. Progress toward union with God seems to stall and prayers seem to go nowhere. The soul experiences night fall. During these nights of the spiritual life, one great leader in the early church, Teresa of Avila counsels, we need to persevere, to persist in prayer despite the contrary feelings. The darkness will eventually lift.

Prayer begins as an intentional act before it becomes integrated into a way of life. This movement from act to habit may be best explained through an analogy. Early in my marriage, my wife asked me why I only addressed her by her name. I didn't use terms of endearment so common in relationships such as "sweetheart." I still don't know why I didn't. It was not an intentional decision. But it seemed important to her so I became intentional. Early efforts to address my wife as "sweetheart" seem a forced effort even if it did express my feelings for her. I continued anyway. Today that term of endearment is said as naturally as drawing my next breath. I can't recall when the intentional act became a natural expression. The same is true for a life of prayer. Prayer may be intentional and unnatural in the beginning, but it is important. Over time, a life of prayer will become part of the natural rhythm of your day.

In this brief reflection, I do not offer tips and techniques to deepen the experience of prayer. Books and other resources of this kind are plentiful. My hope here has been to open the discussion of prayer as an opportunity for growth in the Christian life, acknowledge that difficulties with a life of prayer can be expected and to offer a beginning place for prayer. When we grow in the practice of prayer, our vision of God expands, desires of the heart become changed and joy and contentment in life grow richer.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, grant to us the certainty of Your presence. Direct our thoughts and conversation that we may have greater insight into the experience of prayer. Help us each day to know the joy of conversation with You and to retire in the evening certain of Your protective embrace. Amen.

Reflection Guide

- 1 Restate the goal of the Christian life in your own words.
- 2 How would you describe the value of faith practices as we seek to live a Christian life?
- 3 The reflection suggests that prayer changes both us and changes God. Identify each of those changes.
- 4 Summarize the two common difficulties often encountered with the practice of prayer.
- 5 Has either difficulty in the reflection been one for you? Explain.
- 6 What other difficulties with prayer have you experienced?
- 7 Would you describe your present experience of prayer as a natural rhythm of your day or a more intentional activity?
- 8 What questions or issues does this reflection raise for you?