



June 9-23, 2024

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Week 1: Why Pray?

1. Was there anything in the message on Sunday that stood out to you? What was most helpful for you? In what ways did it stretch your thinking?
2. What responses have you heard to the question: "Why pray?" How do cultural, societal, religious, and personal factors intersect with one's theological framework to inform their attitudes toward prayer and their expectations of its outcomes?
3. How have your beliefs about God shaped the way you pray? Can you think of a time when a change in your understanding of God influenced your prayer life? How can you actively incorporate your understanding of God into your prayer practices?
4. Read Psalm 145:18, Jeremiah 29:12-13, Matthew 6:6, and 1 Peter 5:7. Then, reflect on what these verses teach us about prayer. Why do you think prayer is emphasized in the Bible, and what does this reveal about God's relationship with humanity?
5. In Romans 8:26, Paul speaks about the Holy Spirit interceding for us with "wordless groans" when we don't know what to pray for. How does this verse impact your understanding of prayer? How does it shape your reliance on the Holy Spirit in your prayer life, especially during times of uncertainty or when words fail you?
6. How does prayer deepen our awareness of God's presence, character, and work in our lives and in the world around us? Share specific examples from your own experiences where you've felt a heightened sense of God's presence or gained new insights into God's nature through prayer.
7. In your small group, take a moment to share how prayer has impacted your life or share a challenge you are having with prayer. Then spend some time asking God to help your group develop a greater sense of openness to the mystery of prayer.

Practice for the week: A Journey with prayer

This exercise is designed to help individuals explore their journey with prayer, from identifying situations or needs that prompted their prayers to reflecting on how their understanding of God has influenced their practice of prayer. It encourages introspection, self-awareness, and spiritual growth.

Materials Needed:

- Journal or paper
- Pen or pencil
- Quiet, comfortable space

1. In a quiet and comfortable space free of distractions, take a few deep breaths to center yourself and prepare for introspection.
2. Reflect on significant moments or periods in your life when you turned to prayer. Consider the following questions and jot down your thoughts:
 - What were the situations or needs that prompted you to pray?

- How did these situations or needs affect how you approached prayer? (e.g., urgency, desperation, gratitude)
 - Were there specific emotions associated with these moments of prayer?
3. Review what you've written. Reflect on ways your prayer life has evolved over time. Consider the following prompts:
 - Have there been any changes in the way you pray since those initial moments?
 - How has your understanding of prayer itself changed?
 - Have there been any patterns or themes in the way you pray in response to different situations or needs?
 4. Now, shift your focus to how your understanding of God has evolved. Reflect on the following questions:
 - How did your perception of God influence your prayers in those significant moments you wrote about in section 2 above?
 - Have there been any shifts in your understanding of God as a result of your prayer experiences?
 - In what ways has prayer deepened your relationship with God?
 5. Take some time to synthesize your reflections. Consider any overarching insights or lessons you've gained from this exercise. Write down key takeaways or revelations about your prayer journey and your relationship with God.
 6. End this practice with a moment of gratitude. Reflect on the insights you've gained and express thankfulness for the opportunity to deepen your understanding of yourself and your relationship with God through prayer.

Week 2: Disappointment with Prayer

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything which made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. Share a little about your own personal journey with prayer. When has prayer been helpful and invigorating for you? When have you experienced disappointment? How would you describe your current practice of prayer?
3. In the message on Sunday, we briefly explored the nature of God through the lenses of "God as a person" and "God as a force." In what ways is each of these lenses helpful or unhelpful? How might the metaphor of God as a person affect the way we pray? How might the metaphor of God as force (or presence) affect the way we pray?
4. Read 1 John 4:7-9 and Colossians 1:15-19. What do these passages suggest to us about the mystery of God, the nature of God, and the presence of God? How might these scriptures influence how we pray?
5. Read Matthew 6:5-8. Why do you think Jesus prefaces his example of prayer with these two cautions? What do they suggest about the nature of prayer as Jesus sees it, and how do they apply to us?
6. Read Matthew 6:9-13. What strikes you most about this example of prayer that Jesus gives us? In what ways does this example suggest we should make requests in prayer and for what? In what ways does this example suggest we should let go and surrender through prayer and to what?
7. As a result of this week's topic and the series in general, are there any ways in which you think you need to review your expectations about prayer? What might it look like for you to see prayer as "partnership with God"?
8. Take some time to do this week's prayer practice (see below) together with a group. Afterwards share how you experienced it and then spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly and honestly reflect on the experience yourself.

Prayer Practice for the week: A Practice of Being

This is a practice of prayer for simply "being." There is no need to stress or strain, no need to perform or prove ourselves. Because God is Love, we can relax and just "be." Center yourself by sitting comfortably in silence with your back straight, feet planted on the ground, arms relaxed, and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, focus on your breathing allowing tension to flow away from your body, and your spirit to be at peace. We will slowly and consciously walk through 4 stages in this exercise. Just relax and go with the flow.

Stage 1: Acceptance

Take a moment to consciously accept that God is present to you right now—present in all your reality. You can't make this any more real or any less real—it's all God. So just relax and accept it. God just "is"—and God is love. Take a minute to accept this.

Pause for 1 minute.

Stage 2: Letting go

Let go of any evaluative thoughts. These could be thoughts like "Is God really here?" or "Would God really want to be with someone like me?" or "Why on earth am I doing this?" Don't analyze yourself or God. Just choose to ignore evaluative thoughts and let them go.

Pause for 1 minute

Stage 3: Resonate

Consciously choose to absorb God without reservation. Ease your way into this, relax, be aware of your breathing and with each outbreath sink deeper and deeper into God's love.

Pause for 1 minute.

Now begin to reflect that love back to God. Imagine that you are in a constant cycle of receiving God's love and reflecting it back. As you breathe in, receive God's love. As you breathe out—pour out your love to God. Consciously feel that you are part of this same vibration with God and let it resonate and grow with every breath. Let's take a minute to do this.

Pause for 1 minute.

Stage 4: Just Be

Remain in this posture of giving and receiving love. Let go of any worries about who, what or how you are. Just be conscious that you are... just "be."

Pause for 2 minutes.

Now return to consciousness of your breathing. Open your eyes and be aware of your surroundings—and give thanks that God is in you, and you are in God in all of this reality you experience.

Week 3: Developing a Habit of Prayer

1. Was there anything in the message this week that resonated with you or that seemed relevant to a situation you are facing? Did you find anything surprising or uncomfortable? Was there anything you disagreed with?
2. Think of a time in your life when you were particularly prayerful. What was your motivation for praying? What emotions do you feel as you look back on that time? How has your attitude towards prayer changed over time, if at all?
3. John 15:4-5 in The Message version reads:
Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me. I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing.
 - What do you think it means to make our home in Jesus?
 - What do you think it means for Jesus to make his home in us?
 - How might this impact how we view prayer?
4. 1 John 2:15-17 in The Message version reads:
Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for God. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with God. It just isolates you from God. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.
 - Think about your own life for a moment. Is there an area where you feel yourself striving, wanting to have and be more, or desiring control?
 - How has this impacted how you feel towards God?
 - What might it feel like to let go of that “wanting”?
5. Read Philippians 2:3-9. The speaker on Sunday suggested that this “emptying” and “self-giving” was a defining characteristic of God. Is there an area of your life where you struggle to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus”? What holds you back? Rather than striving to be more loving, how might you practice surrender to God in this situation?
6. Take some time to do this week's prayer practice (see below) together has a group. Afterwards share your experience of it and then spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly and honestly reflect on the experience yourself.

Prayer Practice for the week: Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is an ancient practice that followers of Jesus have used for many centuries to experience a deeper walk with God. It is the essence of surrender. In Centering Prayer, we seek to surrender our whole beings to God—our thoughts, plans, memories, emotions—*everything*. We do this by sitting in silence and continuously consenting to let God have it all. Practiced faithfully over time, Centering Prayer can bring deep transformation, revealing to the heart “God's secret

wisdom" which "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived...but God has revealed it to us by the Spirit." (1 Corinthians 2:7-10.)

- Find a time and place where you can sit comfortably with as few distractions as possible. Ideally, you will be able to set aside 20 minutes for this practice. You may want to set your cell phone or a timer.
- Select a "sacred word" or "prayer word" that will symbolize your intent and consent to focus only on God during this time. It should be short and not distract you. Something simple like love, God, Jesus, peace will be fine. The word itself is not important—the intent to surrender is what's important.
- Close your eyes and tell God that you are willing to release your whole being in order to be one with God and that you are offering your sacred word to signify your intent. Ask Jesus to help you. Begin by slowly and silently letting the word rest in your mind. This is not a mantra to be repeated, it is only to signify intent, and your word will slowly drift away along with your thoughts.
- Whenever you notice a thought, emotion or memory, silently and gently offer your prayer word to replace it. Let your thoughts float by; do not be distressed by their presence, just acknowledge them and let them go with the help of your sacred word. Even "spiritual" thoughts or prayers—let them all go and allow God to work in your mind and heart, unencumbered by your "self."
- At the end of your time, remain in silence with your eyes closed for a few minutes, allowing your thoughts to return. You may want to say the Lord's Prayer as you end the time of centering.