

Prayer and Worship

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Prayer and Worship Cultivate the Inner Life of the Christian Leader

The subjects of prayer and worship have perhaps been most frequently addressed of all the topics important to biblical Christianity. Great, classical Christian literature through the centuries provides impressive descriptions of prayer and eloquent analyses of prayer's challenges and blessings. The church has at its disposal everything from richly crafted literary treatments of prayer to basic how-to manuals and seminars. In spite of the centuries of time, effort, and words invested in describing, analyzing, and encouraging prayer, Christians remain largely unoccupied with this simple yet powerful and essential activity.

We are more inclined to discuss prayer than to pray. The purpose of this course is not to add to all that has been said about prayer. Rather, it is to train into your life the habits, desires, and benefits of being a pray-er—one who prays. The greatest achievement you can enjoy from this study is to experience an increasingly rich and effective life of communion with God and then to lead others into this life of prayer.

Brother Lawrence, the seventeenth-century lay brother in a Carmelite monastery, left this statement that we suggest as both the starting and finishing line for your study:

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Only those can comprehend it who practice and experience it. Yet I do not advise you to do it from that motive. It is not pleasure which we ought to seek in this exercise. Let us do it from a principle of love and because it is God's will for us. (1958, 45)

Course Objectives

1. Define prayer by describing its benefits, purposes, and motivations.
2. Review the Bible's treatment of prayer, including both biblical instructions and historical accounts of praying.
3. Explain the relationship between faith and prayer, and describe prayer's spiritual power.
4. Explain how prayer is a reciprocal experience between God and the one who prays.

5. Describe the relationship between spiritual discipline and prayer, and list practical activities necessary toward developing a life of prayer.
6. Identify challenges and obstacles to a consistent and effective life of prayer.
7. Explain several key factors related to the role of prayer in effective spiritual leadership.
8. Define worship, and relate the Bible's treatment of worship in both Testaments.
9. List and explain principles and methods related to biblical leadership in corporate worship.

Unit 1 Cultivating a Life of Prayer

You are embarking on a study of potentially the most powerful, challenging, and rewarding experience available to humankind—contact with the infinite Creator of the universe. However humans may choose to define and practice prayer, it is at its essence the extraordinary opportunity for a created being to have immediate and direct contact with the Creator. The creature, imprisoned in space and time, limited in knowledge and power, and hampered by self-willed failure, can establish meaningful contact with the uncaused Cause, the timeless source of all that is, and he or she can be eternally changed by that contact.

A life of prayer is a life of continual contact with Eternal God, all that He is and all that He wills for His creation. As you study, remind yourself often that the object of prayer is not academic mastery or certification, but the opportunity to touch the One Who is beyond all limitations and above all inadequacy.

Effective prayer is prayer that produces the fruit of that contact, first in the person and life of the pray-er, and then in the world he or she touches. May your study encourage and instruct you, first in becoming a person who practices continual prayer, and then a person who leaves the fragrance of that practice in the lives of those you touch.

Chapter 1 Soul-Shaping: Introduction to Prayer

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1.1 *Carpe Diem*: Seize the Day

1.2 Our Soul Provider

1.3 Restoration of the Soul

Chapter 2 Rooted and Grounded: The Foundation of Prayer

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Chapter 1: Soul Shaping Prayer

Life is an amazing journey of soul-shaping. Just as a sculptor transforms a lump of clay into a masterpiece, God is involved in the life-long process of molding our lives into the likeness of Christ. One of the primary tools God uses to shape us is prayer. Consequently, prayer is vital to a growing, dynamic faith. What is prayer? How can we pray more consistently? What is effective prayer? Few questions are as important as these. We should spend our whole life answering them. We can learn many helpful insights into this God-instituted action that weds our earthly lives to the heavenly realm. To facilitate our understanding of soul-shaping, this chapter will consider three things:

1. What is prayer?
2. What are the benefits of prayer?
3. How can I know if my soul is poised to be shaped by Him?

Lesson 1.1 *Carpe Diem*: Seize the Day!

Objectives

- 1.1.1 *Explain the significance of God's invitation to prayer.*
- 1.1.2 *Define the phrase a God-shaped vacuum.*
- 1.1.3 *State the significance of knowing God.*

Lesson 1.2 Our Soul Provider

Objective

- 1.2.1 *List and explain four practical benefits of prayer.*

Lesson 1.3 Restoration of the Soul

Objectives

- 1.3.1 *Clarify the importance of replenishing the reservoir of the soul.*
- 1.3.2 *Identify fourteen signs of soul neglect.*
- 1.3.3 *State why we should advance from soul neglect to spiritual vitality.*

***Carpe Diem*: Seize the Day! Lesson 1.1**

The film *Dead Poet's Society* depicts the story of an English teacher's attempt to challenge a class of 1950s post-depression school boys to grab hold of the opportunities life presents them. The film resurrected an obscure Latin phrase, *carpe diem*, which means "seize the day." It is an exhortation to live life to the fullest, to get the most out of each day.

Most Christians would probably say this is what they want from their prayer lives as well—to get the most out of time spent in prayer, to grab hold of God, and seize the day! Thanks to the work of Christ on the Cross, every believer has the opportunity to enter into the Holy of Holies, to the very throne of God. So what are you waiting for? Get ready to seize the day!

Explain the significance of God's invitation to prayer?

A Divine Invitation

What is Prayer?

Throughout history, great men and women have reflected on the meaning of prayer, looking to the Scriptures and their own experiences with God.

- The ancients defined prayer as a climbing up of the heart unto God.—Martin Luther
- Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the soul to God, through Christ in the strength and assistance of the Spirit, for such things as God has promised.—John Bunyan
- Prayer is the contact of a living soul with God. In prayer, God stoops to kiss man, to bless man, and to aid in everything that God can devise or man can need.—E.M. Bounds
- Prayer is a time exposure of the soul to God.—E. Stanley Jones
- Prayer is the gymnasium of the soul.—Samuel M. Zwemer

God is knocking on our heart's door, with a divine invitation to fellowship with Him. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). We often hear this passage used in a context of Christ standing at the heart's door of unbelievers, encouraging them to invite Him into their lives. Yet, we should remember that this letter was written to the **church at Laodicea**, to believers. If Christ is already living inside of someone, why does He have to knock on their heart's door and ask to commune with them? Clearly, He recognizes our human propensity to become preoccupied with life's many activities and responsibilities (remember Mary and Martha?).

Why does God invite us to pray?

While God is the one initiating the invitation to a life of communion with Him, it requires a response from us. We must create space in our lives in which God will act.

“God, who made space in the most literal sense in the universe, needs us to protect a God-space, to prevent our lives from filling up with other things” (Yancey 2006, 286). That means sheltering space in our lives just for Him. We know that God spoke through the psalmist to say, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). God invites us to be with Him and get to know Him.

How would you define prayer?

Why does God extend this invitation? Why should it matter to Him whether we—mere mortals—pray? It matters because we matter profoundly to God. God created the world with humanity in mind, set us at its center, continued to love us despite our failing, and even sent His only Son to rescue us. Who indeed deserves our praise but the God who originated every good and perfect gift? When asked to identify the most important rule in life, Jesus immediately responded, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). In those words, He summed up what God most wants from us. Our most treasured gift to God, that which God can never force, is love. Prayer is the primary vehicle for us to express that love and grow in our love relationship with Him.

Our God-Shaped Vacuum

Lesson Objective <i>Define the phrase a God-shaped vacuum.</i>
Interactive question Why do human beings seek spiritual experience?

We can hardly turn on the television or read the newspaper without seeing some reference to spirituality. Contemporary society is hungry for spiritual reality; so great is the longing that many people often seek spiritual experience in all the wrong places. Beneath a myriad of personal and cultural factors contributing to this searching lies a deeper reason for the spiritual hunger of our day: humans are innately spiritual. God

created us for a relationship with Him. Therefore, until that relationship is sought and found, there will always be an emptiness at the core of our being. Centuries ago Saint Augustine confessed to God, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine quoted in Boulding 2002, 3). We have a void in our lives, a vacuum that only God can fill. People try to fill it with many things, but only God can fill this God-shaped hole.

Many children have learned their shapes while playing with a plastic toy ball. It is a red and blue ball, familiar to parents, that contains differently shaped holes. Young children play with it by pushing each yellow block of different shapes through its correspondingly shaped hole. Younger children sometimes try to force a round block into a triangular hole, or a star shape into a square hole. It is not until they learn their shapes that they realize each block has only one hole in which it will fit. How easy it is to do the same thing in our spiritual lives. We have a God-shaped hole that only He can fill, yet we try to fill the void with other things. Ultimately, we have to learn that only God can fill the emptiness at the core of our being. Only when we come to this realization will we respond to His divine invitation to take a holiday from all our other activities and cultivate our relationship with Him.

Yada, Yada, Yada

Lesson Objective <i>State the significance of knowing God.</i>
Interactive Question What is the significance of the use of the word <i>yada</i> to describe our relationship with God?

It is our privilege to pray to a personal God, who knows us and wants to be known by us. *Yada* is one Hebrew word for knowing God; it refers to intimacy. It is the same word used for the physical relationship between a husband and a wife: “Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant” (Genesis 4:1). It is surprising that Scripture uses a word like this to speak of God’s desire for a relationship with us. It is deeply intimate, life-creating, in-fleshed, and therefore transforming. True knowledge of another is much more than amassing data about that person. It must be increasingly synonymous with

love; that is, with self-giving, mutuality, and union. Therefore, experience equals knowing.

Interactive question

How is prayer like oxygen?

God is inviting us to a life of intimacy and communion with Him, and prayer is the way this life is cultivated in us. It becomes our very existence. Martin Luther said, “To be a Christian without prayer, is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” Prayer is the oxygen of the spiritual life; without it, we die. When we are born from above by the Spirit of God, the life of the Son of God is born in us; we can either starve that life or nourish it (Tan and Gregg 1997, 66). “Prayer,” says **Julian of Norwich**, “unites the soul to God.” An important aim of prayer is intimacy with God. Through prayer, we explore a deeper and more intimate relationship with Him. We will experience a new dynamic in our relationship with God when we strive to know Him and be known by Him, in this manner.

When we desire to know someone, we enjoy simply spending time in his or her company. Why else do we cuddle children, sit by the bedside of a sick loved one, or rack up extra charges on a mobile phone with a boyfriend or girlfriend? Every lover longs to know the needs and desires of his or her beloved. Likewise, with God, simply spending time together is the most relevant act of all. It is only through time spent together that we will truly get to know Him and develop that deep sense of intimacy and communion.

Our Soul Provider Lesson 1.2

As we begin to cultivate this kind of intimacy with God, we begin to understand that God, our Creator and Sustainer, wants to become our Soul Provider. As we spend time with Him, He fulfills our deepest needs and longings, and we begin to enjoy the many benefits of prayer.

Lesson Objectives

List and explain four practical benefits of prayer.

Prayer is the Pathway to God’s Presence

What are four practical benefits of prayer?

Too many Christians know a lot about God, but rarely experience His presence in their lives. Sometimes, this is simply from failing to spend time in prayer. Other times, it is from an over-emphasis on the **transcendence** of God. God is only spoken of in lofty and exalted terms (and rightfully so), but to the point that God becomes distant, or detached from our daily lives. However, as we begin to grow in prayer, we discover that God is closer than we think.

When we talk about growing in our prayer lives, we are talking about much more than mere mechanics or methods. The focus of prayer is not prayer, but God himself. We pray not simply to go through the motions of praying, but to experience the presence of God. “Prayer, like climbing mountains, is a challenge, but it is much more than just a challenge. We do not pray simply ‘because it is there.’ Instead, prayer is our response to God’s interest in us and His love for us” (Houston 1990, 33–34).

How does prayer deepen our relationship with God?

Prayer and God’s presence are two sides of the same coin. Awareness of God’s presence comes as the result of spending time communing with Him. Prayer deepens our relationship with God; it is how we learn the mind and will of God. To pray is to become increasingly aware that God’s Spirit lives within us. By bringing us into the presence of God, and giving us a glimpse of the eternal perspective, prayer radically changes how we experience life.

To learn to live in the spirit of prayer is to learn to walk in the presence of God. “**Brother Lawrence**, a seventeenth-century French monk, gave the world a phrase that well describes this deep communion with our Lord: ‘practicing the presence of God.’ He wrote that we can grow in listening and guidance until we become increasingly aware of His presence and gentle leading in all the circumstances of our living” (Tan and Gregg 1997, 60). It involves grabbing hold of God and living out of a divine center—allowing our faith to permeate every facet of our lives.

When we practice being aware of God’s presence, we begin to pick up His signals all through the day. Wherever we may be, we begin to dialogue with the Lord. We share our heart with Him and know He is listening—because He speaks back to us. We can commune meaningfully with the Lord whether in the car, on the job, at home, while

working out, while playing with a child, while lying in bed at night, or anytime, anywhere, under any circumstance. Prayer has nothing to do with being in church or on our knees. It has to do with God's presence in and around us.

This kind of living does not happen effortlessly. We must desire it and seek it with all our hearts. It requires choosing a course of action that will draw us into constant communion with God. It means practicing the disciplines that will put us in a position to hear from God (prayer, meditation, listening, and guidance). The results are staggering: communion with God becomes a launching pad for effective service and ministry in partnership with Him. Intimacy brings confidence and peace that we are indeed in relationship with the living God. Living out of a divine center allows our faith to take on new significance as we live it out in every facet of life. Having a divine center means that He is the One who is the pacesetter. He is always the One to take the initiative to accomplish what He wants to do. When we are God-centered, even the desires to do the things that please God come from God's initiative in our lives.

Prayer Facilitates a Transforming Friendship

How does prayer change a person?

We have seen that when we pray, we enter the very presence of God. The amazing reality is that we cannot be in the presence of a holy God and not be changed. Thus, real prayer is life-creating and life-changing. To pray is to change. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ. Throughout Scripture we see that God takes the initiative to reveal himself to people. "That revelation," says Henry Blackaby, "is always an invitation for the individual to adjust his or her life to God. None of the people God ever encountered could remain the same after the encounter. They had to make major adjustments in their lives in order to walk obediently with God" (Blackaby and King 1990, 32).

Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us, for intimacy is a spotlight that exposes our true selves. When we pray, God graciously reveals our human failings, and sets us free from them (if we have no real desire to change, we will quickly abandon prayer from our lives). As we engage in prayer, we give God time and room to draw us near to himself and grow us into the likeness of Jesus.

Unfortunately, many Western Christians have adopted an exclusively functional approach to prayer. We tend to think of prayer as something we *do* only to get God to produce the results we believe are needed. Go into any Christian bookstore and note the

number of books devoted to techniques of prayer. We are interested in knowing what works and developing the skills that will ensure that our prayers are effective. As a result, our prayer tends to be a shopping list of things to be accomplished, an attempt to manipulate the symptoms of our lives without really entering into a deep, transforming relationship with God. However, God designed prayer to be relational. Henri Nouwen states this:

We want to move closer to God, the source and goal of our existence, but at the same time we realize that the closer we come to God the stronger will be his demand to let go of the many “safe” structures we have built around ourselves. Prayer is such a radical act because it requires us to criticize our world’s way of being in the world, to lay down our old selves and accept our new self, which is Christ ... prayer therefore is the act of dying to all that we consider to be our own and of being born to a new existence which is not of this world. (Nouwen 1979, 6)

This certainly puts our shopping list and symptom manipulation prayers into a new light. These prayers may actually be our attempt to avoid such a radical relationship with God in the world, an attempt to keep God at arm’s length and maintain control of our relationship with God on our terms. Authentic prayer will draw us into the world on God’s terms, not ours. Prayer does not move God to our agenda; it moves us to His agenda.

Consequently, the more time we spend with Christ, the more we begin to act like Him. As we fill our hearts and minds with the things of God, there will be less room for earthly things: A dead leaf cannot remain where a new bud is springing, nor can worldliness remain where the blessings of God are flowing.

This transformation occurs in a context of relationship, of friendship. There was a time, Genesis informs us, when God and Adam walked together in the garden and conversed as friends. Nothing seemed more natural for Adam than to commune with the One who had made him. Prayer was as natural as conversation with a colleague or a lover. At the moment of the Fall, however, Adam and all who succeeded him, were marred from our original likeness in God’s image, and God’s presence grew more remote. Thankfully, in Christ, we are being reshaped according to the image we were created to reflect, and the broken relationship is restored. In John 15:15, Jesus restores the possibility of friendship with our Creator: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” Now, “God is not

far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). So, every believer has access to a transforming friendship with God through prayer.

This transforming friendship is illustrated poignantly in the story of Ricky Hoyt. Each year, the Hawaiian island of Kona hosts the *Ironman Triathlon*. This race tests even the strongest athlete to the max. It starts with a 2.4-mile ocean swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a 26-mile marathon—all in the scorching heat of Kona. In 1989, a young man named Ricky Hoyt trained for the race with his father. What was amazing was that Ricky was disabled from birth. He knew that he would get skeptical looks on the race course, and he knew that the winners would cross the finish line hours ahead of him. But his goal was to finish the race, even if it took all day. Words cannot do justice to the events of the day. The grim look of determination on Ricky’s face. The astonished looks of the spectators. The loneliness of running by flashlight on the deserted roads of Kona. Ricky started the final third event of the race well after the leaders had already finished the entire race. Finally, there was a roar of approval as the crowd greeted Ricky at the finish line. An ear-to-ear smile was on the face of the young man who refused to let a disability define his life. The amazing fact was that Ricky could not even walk, yet he had finished a triathlon. Ricky Hoyt was born with cerebral palsy. He finished the race just one second ahead of his 49-year-old father—the man who swam through 2.4 miles of ocean pulling Ricky behind him in a rubber raft, then pedaled an oversized, 58-pound bike for 112 miles with Ricky sitting in a basket on the front. Then he pushed Ricky in a special cart for the 26.3-mile running marathon. It was the love and strength of a father that took Ricky where he could not go alone (Reccord and Singer 2005).

This is an amazing analogy of a transforming friendship with Christ. God does not call us to Him so that we can keep pursuing our own agenda or accomplish a mission we could have done by ourselves. When God calls us into a life-changing relationship with Him, He takes us places we could never go alone. Like Ricky Hoyt, we become totally dependent on our Father, and He transforms us completely. Anything that we do with and for God, comes not from our own strength, but from Christ’s transforming work in us.

Prayer Is the Pathway to God’s Power

Where does prayer get its power?

The power of prayer is unleashed in the lives of those who spend time in God's presence. While we use the phrase "the power of prayer," it should be remembered that in and of itself prayer has zero power. "The power released when we pray resides in the One who has invited us so often and so urgently to pray, the One whose death has given us access to the throne of the God of the universe—our Savior, Jesus Christ" (Fryar 1997, 14). Through the power of Jesus, prayer changes things.

One of my favorite Bible stories is that of the duel between Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18). After spending all day in frantic prayer, dancing and slashing their bodies, the 850 prophets received no response to their prayers. Then, Elijah prayed a simple and direct prayer, and God immediately struck the altar (which had been saturated with water) with His fire. Hundreds of years later, the apostle James wrote about Elijah and how his prayers produced remarkable displays of God's power. "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops" (James 5:17–18). Thus, James contended, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (v. 16). This same awesome power of God is still available to believers today.

Yet, when were any of us last involved in a 'prayer challenge' with evil rulers in our community or nation? When was the last time we saw God's power unleashed in response to our prayers? When has the Lord's power been evident in our churches, in our prayer meetings, in our lives? (Cedar 1998, 27–28)

God's power released in answer to Elijah's prayer was indeed remarkable. Yet the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel is not an isolated event. The Bible reports a number of such occasions when the power of God was unleashed in response to the prayers of His servants (including Abraham, Moses, Hannah, Samuel, David, Hezekiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Peter, John, Paul, and James). Down through the ages, God has answered the prayers of His people. God's enemies prosper when Christians fail to pray. Corrie ten Boom wrote, "Prayer is powerful. The devil smiles when we make plans. He laughs when we get too busy. But he trembles when we pray—especially when we pray together" (ten Boom 1975, 22).

A life of prayer is a life of great adventure and unlimited potential. Prayer moves us from the safe and comfortable to the impossible and miraculous. Prayer precedes revival, renewal, and signs and wonders. Prayer is the difference between doing things for God in our own strength or carrying on His ministry by the power of the Holy Spirit. Anything truly great is accomplished "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says

the Lord” (Zechariah 4:6). When we cooperate together with the Spirit we are able to accomplish so much more for the Kingdom, for 1 plus 1 no longer equals 2.

Prayer Is Essential for Effective Ministry

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, prayer was a necessary foundation for effective ministry. In Acts 6:4, the apostles solicited help with the physical tasks of ministry so that they could devote themselves to prayer and the preaching of the Word.

A careful reading of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy shows that prayer was not a prelude to the ministry God did through Moses and Aaron as they led the children of Israel out of Egypt and into the land the Lord had promised to give them. In a real sense, prayer itself was their ministry. Time and again these two—prophet and priest—fell on their faces before God, unashamed to show their helplessness to the people they led. Whenever the people disobeyed, Moses and Aaron resorted to intercession. If Moses needed to pray as he served God’s people, how much do we ourselves need it as we serve others in Christ’s name? “Who am I,” Moses asked of Yahweh at the burning bush, “that I should lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). From day one, Moses knew his own insufficiency, his own weakness. That knowledge drove him to his knees. That knowledge threw him on his face before God and before those whom he led. And that knowledge forged a chain linking Moses with Paul and with all God’s servants down through history who have been led by God to recognize their inability to minister in their own strength (Fryar 1997, 105, 108).

Why is prayer essential to effective ministry?

Furthermore, prayer is mandatory for some forms of ministry. The connection between prayer and ministry is clearly demonstrated in the meeting between Jesus and a demoniac boy. Jesus instructed His disciples that this authority can only come through prayer and fasting (Mark 9:29). Prayer accomplishes some things that nothing else can do. Something happens when I pray that does not happen if I do not. Therefore, if I have not prayed today, something has gone undone in my life or in the life of others, who may have been touched through my prayer. Of course, our prayers must come from a right heart and right motivations, revealing our need for God, and our need for God to act.

The extent to which we are willing and able to weave the spiritual disciplines into our own private lives will determine our ability to minister effectively. We cannot lead people where we have not gone. We can have all the leadership skills in the world, and simply be a good leader, not a good spiritual leader. Personal charisma and skills will

only take a leader so far. Relying on skills and public persona will only last for a season. Many ministers become casualties by running away from themselves, from God, and into their work (activity trap). Instead, we must learn to see prayer for what it is: God's way of providing what we need to sustain us in our ministry.

Restoration of the Soul Lesson 1.3

Without a Prayer in a Hostile World

For many people, prayer can be the most forbidding, daunting obstacle to their Christian life. It often seems that we do anything but pray. Reading biographies of famous Christians only makes us feel more guilty because their prayer life puts ours to shame. Even reading a book on prayer can seem overwhelming. When we reach this stage, it is tempting to simply give up on the struggle. This is exactly what many Christians do for years on end. Others continue with the struggle, trying desperately to break through the barriers that stand so firmly between them and a habit of regular prayer (Houston 1990, 33).

But in all the areas of our life, prayer is the one in which we can least afford to be complacent. We may spend regular time exercising and dieting for the sake of our bodies, but refuse to make time for prayer for the sake of our souls. We dedicate enormous effort towards developing our professional skills, yet time in communion with God has become a lost art. Prayerlessness is simply part of a larger picture of modern society. Our culture stresses this selfish notion:

Lesson Objectives

Clarify the importance of replenishing the reservoir of the soul.

Interactive Question

How does prayer replenish the soul?

“Self-fulfillment” is the panacea for all our problems ... It is easy to succumb to the secular spirit when we have such faith in technology, such hope in pragmatism, and

such love of human intellect. Living without prayer is the result of going to bed with all the attitudes of a modern secular society. (Houston 1990, 14–16)

Many Christians have failed to make prayer a way of life simply because they are not aware of the basic needs of their souls. Our soul is like an inner reservoir, which supports us in the activities, pressures, and stresses of life. To be effective, this reservoir must continually be replenished. Jesus is the source of living water (John 7:37–38), and fellowship with Him is the only source of lasting refreshment. Prayer nurtures the soul by cultivating this vital connection to our source. Too often, however, we fail to pray and our personal reservoir becomes dry. Worse yet, we continue to neglect the only source of living water. How do we know if our spiritual reservoir is running low? Consider the following symptoms.

Recognizing the Symptoms of Soul Neglect

Too many Christians allow the state of their inner lives to go unchecked. They fail to recognize that many of the problems they face have their roots in soul issues. There are many symptoms, but they rarely stop long enough to recognize and address them (human beings have an amazing tolerance for misery). We are reluctant to hold up a mirror to our souls by which we might better see what is going on inside of us. Throughout the Psalms, David frequently considered the condition of his soul (examples: Psalms 6:3 and 42:5). On these occasions, he took time to look within, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern the true state of his soul.

Lesson Objective

Identify fourteen signs of soul neglect.

With the physical body there are basic vital signs used to determine the inside condition: heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, and body chemistry. There are also certain vital signs of the soul to measure spiritual health and symptoms of disease. In his book *Soulshaping*, Douglas Rumford discusses fourteen symptoms of soul neglect. These symptoms are meant to be tools for examining your heart. The list is suggestive, not exhaustive, but begins to give an idea if your personal reservoir is running low. He suggests that our prayer life may be slipping if we see clusters of the following symptoms in ourselves:

- Low-grade depression
- Busy but bored
- Loss of control over life's routine (work in disarray)
- Loss of responsiveness to others (apathy)

Interactive question
What are the fourteen signs of
soul neglect?

- Withdrawal from responsibility and leadership
- Preoccupation with projects of lesser importance
- Restlessness and dissatisfaction
- Resurgence of unhealthy habits (diminished impulse control/resistance to temptation)
- Guilt and shame
- A hard heart (loss of spiritual sensitivity/callousness)
- Increased irritation/insensitivity with others
- You conform, not transform
- Loss of urgency in our prayers
- You feel good about your spiritual progress

These are symptoms of soul neglect that result from shortchanging our souls. These red flags warn that our prayer life needs attention. Once a red flag is waved, our work may involve painful intervention, but it is better than letting the condition deteriorate. Our call, then, is to rediscover prayer—God's strategy for releasing the streams of living water that His Spirit provides within us.

From Soul Neglect to Spiritual Vitality

Lesson Objective

State why we should advance from soul neglect to spiritual vitality.

You may be wondering, “Why do I need to bother with all this introspection?” If you do not stop and recognize the state of your soul, you may be on the path to burnout. More importantly, if you look and address what you see you will find freedom. Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). This is because self-knowledge can point us beyond ourselves. If we are truly honest with ourselves, we will have to return to our Source. The writer of Proverbs exhorts us, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Proverbs 4:23). The care for our souls is one of the most important endeavors we can undertake.

As we assess the condition of our souls, we are taking the first steps of spiritual renewal. When we have the faith and courage to take that inner look, we are able to discover those things that drain our spiritual reservoirs, as well as those things that replenish it. We examine our hearts not only in times of crisis, but in order to avoid crisis. When we are regularly looking at our souls, we are able to engage in spiritual activities that will build our souls and put us on a path to spiritual vitality. When we experience spiritual vitality, we are able to enjoy God in the midst of life. A life of spiritual vitality shines, radiating hope and purpose in a dark and confused world.

So how do you know if your soul is healthy? What does spiritual vitality look like in the day-to-day routine of life? Consider these qualities:

- A continuing experience of grace
- A sense of expectancy that is rooted in faith
- The ability to respond to and see life from God’s perspective
- Resilience (ability to recover from misfortune or adjust to change)
- Compassion
- Zeal (holy energy)
- Integrity
- Gratitude

What are the signs of a healthy soul?

Spiritual vitality cannot be reduced to systems and methods. It is an adventure of love. Even as we grow in our knowledge of prayer, it can never become a ritual substitute for the spontaneous and authentic interaction and intimacy with our Lord.

Get a Prayer Life

We face the opportunity of a lifetime: God almighty, the Creator of the universe, wants to know us and be known by us. We can enjoy a transforming friendship, one which regularly experiences God's presence and power, and it all starts with prayer. When we live in constant communion with God, our needs are met, our faith increased, our love expanded, and our souls shaped for eternity. He is inviting us to a more abundant life right now. "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–17). Do not wait any longer. Seize the Day!

Chapter 2: Rooted and Grounded: Foundation of Prayer

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, my husband Jay spent time on his uncle's farm. Located on beautiful Puget Sound, many acres of the farm were covered in forests. In times of heavy rain (which was most of the time) the lower-lying areas of the farm became a marshland, an environment perfect for growing cedar trees. These trees grew to be very large, with trunks five to seven feet around at the base. Because there was an abundance of surface water, the roots did not have to dig deep; all the water they needed was on the surface. But when storms would come in off the Pacific Ocean, and the winds began to blow, these trees would topple as easily as if someone had blown over rows of toothpicks.

Jay learned a spiritual truth during long days of chopping firewood. The deeper a tree's roots are forced to go in search of water, the stronger the tree will become. In the same way, a deeply rooted prayer life is crucial to its stability throughout the storms and seasons of life. Like a tree planted by water (Jeremiah 17:8), our prayer lives will grow

strong and fruitful. A firm foundation will lead to a nourishing and productive prayer life, marked by longevity and stability.

So how do we establish deep roots in our prayer lives? When all else fails, read the instructions! Infamous last words. Why is it that more often than not, we barge ahead and try to do things on our own, struggling through, without stopping to take the time to read the instruction manual? Similarly, many Christians try to do this with prayer. They struggle through a powerless, boring prayer life, yet seem content just to stay there, or give up altogether—when God’s Word is full of insights that lead to a deep and transforming time of communion with the Creator of the Universe!

This chapter provides a study of the progressive biblical revelation on prayer. We will highlight the significant role that prayer has played in the lives of God’s children, from Old Testament times until now. As you are challenged by some incredible people of prayer, and as you discover the Bible’s teaching on what prayer can be for believers today, may you be challenged to new depths in your prayer life. May you become firmly rooted and grounded, with a strong foundation capable of ensuring some serious soul-shaping.

Lesson 2.1 Prayer in the Old Testament

Objectives

- 2.1.1 Recount one distinguishing feature of prayer in each of Israel’s six historical periods.***
- 2.1.2 For each period, identify one spiritual leader and discuss how his or her being a person of prayer impacted his or her leadership.***
- 2.1.3 List and explain three themes, or overarching descriptions, of the role of prayer in the Old Testament.***

Lesson 2.2 Prayer in the New Testament

Objectives

- 2.2.1 List three themes, or overarching descriptions, of prayer in the New Testament, comparing and contrasting each one with that of the Old Testament.***
- 2.2.2 Discuss the prayer life of Jesus, identifying the two areas in which prayer was foundational for Him.***

2.2.3 State three important principles for today based on Jesus' teaching regarding prayer.

2.2.4 Identify the ramifications that Jesus' prayer life has on the believer today.

2.2.5 List the six characteristics of prayer in the early church, as seen in Acts.

Lesson 2.3 The Holy Spirit's Assistance in Prayer

Objective

2.3.1 Identify five ways that the Holy Spirit assists us in our prayer

Prayer in the Old Testament Lesson 2.1

The Old Testament is bursting with the subject of prayer. It makes its debut in the book of Genesis and is strikingly evident all the way to the closing pages of Malachi. Significantly, of all God's creatures, only people pray. Prayer is our link with the Creator, and the Old Testament is full of accounts of individuals having personal communication with God. To give full attention to each of the prayers of the Old Testament would require a sizeable volume. Therefore, we will only consider selected passages, traced throughout each era of the nation of Israel, in order to discover over-arching themes regarding the role of prayer in the Old Testament.

Lesson Objective

Recount one distinguishing feature of prayer in each of Israel's six historical periods.

Specific Old Testament teaching regarding prayer is examined in detail in the accompanying textbook to this course (*The Spirit Helps Us Pray: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, by Robert Brandt and Zenas Bicket), but excerpts from it are included here to highlight the over-arching role of prayer in the Old Testament. Once these teachings are established, we can compare and contrast prayer in the Old Testament with the role of prayer as portrayed in the New Testament.

From the Beginnings through the Patriarchal Period

Lesson Objective

For each period, identify one spiritual leader and discuss how his or her being a person of prayer impacted his or her leadership.

It did not take long for God to initiate communication with those He created in His image. The first record of communication between God and humankind occurs in the opening chapter of the Bible (Genesis 1:28). Although the specific term *prayer* is not used in the account of Adam and Eve, communication between them and God is clearly evident, as God walked and talked with them in the garden, in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). In fact, after the Fall, Adam and Eve could not tolerate such close communion and their consciences caused them to try and hide from God. Since that time, humankind has been endeavoring to restore the breach in relationship with our Creator. We were created to be in relationship with God; He invites us into intimate communion with Him. As we draw near to Him, in His faithfulness, He will commune with us.

How did prayer impact Abraham's leadership?

As we continue to read the opening chapters of the Bible, we quickly see that the patriarchs were persons of prayer. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all talked with God and received supernatural answers to prayers. Though others before—and after—him had faith, it is Abraham who can be called the *father* of the faith. For thousands of years, “those who believe” were identified as the children of Abraham (Galatians. 3:6–9). Abraham was identified by God as “my friend” (Isaiah 41:8), indicating their close relationship. Why did Abraham rise to such an esteemed stature as the father of the faithful? Two things: His obedience to the word of the Lord and his building of altars for public worship and calling upon the name of the Lord. These demonstrate his unshakable belief in God. Hearing the word of the Lord, worshipping at an altar, and showing faith in Almighty God are inseparable in the Old Testament.

Though the epitome of a person of faith, Abraham still bore proof of his own humanity. More than once he became vulnerable to failure when he did not pray, and he leaned on his own resources instead of on God (attempting to produce an heir with Hagar, deceiving King Abimelech, and so on). However, Abraham did not allow past failure to discourage him from further praying. Instead, he sought God for healing in the lives of those who suffered because of his actions. “Abraham prayed to God, and God

healed Abimelech, his wife, and his slave girls so they could have children again, for the Lord had closed up every womb in Abimelech's household because of Abraham's wife Sarah" (Genesis 20:17–18). It is encouraging to know that even in our weaknesses, He can be made strong!

Another noteworthy individual during this period was Job. (While the book of Job appears much later in the Old Testament canon, it is believed that the setting is during the patriarchal period.) Prayer takes on a new dimension in this remarkable account of someone tested almost beyond human endurance. From Job we can learn both how not to pray—and how better to pray—when confronted with difficult circumstances. Job wrestled with God, wanting to blame Him for his suffering. Pain can distort our view of God. We reason, if God can relieve suffering, but does not, then He must accept responsibility for the unrelieved pain. In his darkest hour, Job prayed for God to take his life (Job 6:8–9). In the midst of his struggle, Job lost his ability to discern the divine purpose and to see beyond the present. Fortunately, believers today have the Holy Spirit to help provide counsel and comfort during our weakest times (Romans 8:26). If nothing else makes sense, He at least reminds us that the testing of our faith develops perseverance, and perseverance must finish its work so that we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:3–4). In the end, Job submitted to God's sovereignty over him. He explained his change of heart: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). Job's entire perspective had changed because he had encountered God. He saw himself in a whole new light; that is what happens when people experience God (Isaiah 6:1–5).

What is unique about Hebrew prayer in the patriarchal period?

A few summarizing comments should be made regarding the uniqueness of prayer in the patriarchal period. For the first time ever, in contrast to the surrounding polytheistic cultures, Hebrew prayer was addressed to the one God, Yahweh. Furthermore, unlike neighboring cultures, Yahweh always remained a personal God. Yahweh was *the* living sovereign who confronted His people in a personal way (in both love and wrath). This understanding of the personal nature of Yahweh resulted in the pray-er earnestly seeking to be heard. "For if Yahweh heard the prayer of his faithful servants, then the answer would surely come. For this reason ... Old Testament prayers appealed to Yahweh on the basis of his past actions and his promises of future [blessings]" (Grenz 2005, 9).

Thus, from the earliest stages of God communicating with His creation, prayer has always carried an overtone of relationship—initiated by God's loving-kindness and

sustained by His faithfulness. Though the patriarchs preceded the formalized pattern of worship and forgiveness given through Moses in the tabernacle, they recognized that God demanded sacrifice and obedience. Meeting these requirements, they enjoyed a communion with God, demonstrating that God speaks to and accepts worship from those who sincerely seek His face.

Interactive Question

With what was prayer associated under the Mosaic covenant?

Israel under the Mosaic Covenant

With the founding of Israel as a nation, the patriarchal period ended and God began dealing with His people under a national covenant given to Moses at Sinai. The Law required that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22). Consequently, for the remainder of much of the Old Testament, prayer became closely associated with sacrifice.

Of all the Old Testament leaders who engaged in prayer, it is doubtful that any can compare to Moses. Communication with God was virtually Moses' sole occupation. Scripture is full of the statement, "as the Lord commanded Moses." As Israel's leader and deliverer, Moses' life was marked by intimate communion with God (Exodus 3:1–4; 8:12–13, 30–31; 9:27–35; 10:16–20; 14:13–15). Moses' prayers were primarily concerned for Israel's relationship with God. Overwhelmed with the plight of his people, much of his ministry was spent interceding on Israel's behalf (Exodus 33:12–23; Deuteronomy 9:20, 25–28).

It was through Moses' leadership that God gave the instructions for building the tabernacle in the wilderness. At the heart of the tabernacle was the Holy of Holies, where God's presence dwelled. Though God's presence was at the center, the ordinary Israelite could not approach Him directly; access was only through a mediator (priest) and a blood sacrifice. Revolving around an intricate sacrificial system, prayers were offered by the priests for the forgiveness of sin and seeking of God's blessing. At that point, ritual sacrifice, with its accompanying intercession on behalf of the people, was predominantly the role of the priests.

Israel under the Judges

What impact was made by a lack of prayer during the time of the judges?

Upon the death of Moses, Israel entered into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. Unfortunately, in the generations that followed, the people did not know the Lord—or His mighty power—in their own experience (Judges 2:10). This implies a lack of communion with God, including a lack of prayer. As a result, the tribes fell apart, turned to idolatry with its immoral standards, and without godly leadership, “everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 17:6). When the people finally repented and cried out to God, He answered their prayers and provided a judge as deliverer. But when that judge died, they reverted to their sinful ways. This cycle was repeated over and over. The whole period from Joshua to King Saul was full of spiritual ups and downs, yet we see that God always responded when the Israelites turned in repentance to seek His help through prayer.

One of the judges sent by God to deliver His people during this time was Deborah. Women played a significant role in Israel’s history, as evidenced here in the godly leadership of Deborah. Prayer can take many forms, from articulate petition to “groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26). Deborah’s recorded prayer (Judges 5:1–2) is a song of praise, rehearsing God’s mighty acts. As the recipient of His strength and guidance for victory in battle, Deborah’s prayer offers an inspiring pattern for renewing our faith in God. Anyone who prays will profit by recounting the amazing things God has done—for His Kingdom and for His people.

What does the story of Hannah teach us about prayer?

The sin cycle was repeated until Samuel’s time. Samuel was one of Israel’s most influential prophets; he finally united the tribes. His prayers brought great revival and victory (1 Samuel 7:3, 5, 12–13). Interestingly Samuel’s very life was the result of a praying mother—Hannah. Her heartfelt cries to God in the temple remind us that the heart’s deepest desires sometimes become the means of affecting divine purpose. We also see that weeping and praying can go hand-in-hand. Jesus, too, “offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears” (Hebrews 5:7). Tears can announce the soul’s anguish and its intensity and elicit response from a compassionate God (2 Kings 20:5). Unique to Hannah’s praying was the fact that “her lips were moving but her voice was not heard” (1 Samuel 1:13). Tears came from her eyes, but the prayer came from her heart. This is the first recorded instance of silent prayer, demonstrating that effectiveness in prayer is not dependent on the petitioner’s volume. Eli, the priest, told Hannah to “ ‘Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of

him' ” (1 Samuel 1:17). Hannah's faith rested on that word, and in due season, Samuel was born.

Born out of prayer, it should come as no surprise that Samuel was just a child when he learned to pray. “The Lord came and stood there, calling as at other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’ ” (1 Samuel 3:10). The priest, Eli, had taught him to pray, instructing: “If he calls you, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’ ” (1 Samuel 3:9). From that time, Samuel entered into dialogue with God. (We should never underestimate a child's ability to hear God's voice!) Samuel's ability to pray was the launching pad for his godly and illustrious ministry. Having learned to recognize the voice of God and to communicate with Him in prayer, Samuel was fit for the task of spiritual leadership. To the nation he pledged his prayer and continued leadership: “Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right” (1 Samuel 12:23). God used Samuel to bring spiritual revival to the wayward nation, as well as victory to Israel, because he was a praying leader (1 Samuel 7:5–9; 8:6; 12:18–19; 15:11).

Israel under the United Monarchy

What does David's life demonstrate about prayer?

Through Samuel's spiritual leadership, the nation was united and David was anointed king. God called David a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22). David was clearly a man of prayer; multitudes of his prayers to God are recorded in the Psalms. David demonstrated that prayer is appropriate in all of life's circumstances. His prayers contain petition, confession, praise and worship, lament, testimony, and prayers for vindication. He prayed in times of failure and adversity as well as in times of great blessing and success. The psalmists repeatedly honor God for His majestic power and glory, for His faithfulness, justice, and unfailing love. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. Full of mercy, He is always ready to forgive. David realized that, like nothing else, praise brings us into God's presence as we recognize who He is, what He has done, and what He can do.

The biblical prayers of David's son, King Solomon are worthy of note. While unlike his father David, very few of Solomon's prayers are recorded, but for each recorded prayer, there is also a recorded answer. Possibly his most famous prayer, Solomon humbly prayed for wisdom as a leader. “But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of

yours?” God granted Solomon’s prayer, giving him profound wisdom to lead, also adding what the humble leader had not asked for: riches, honor, and a long life (1 Kings 3:5–9, 11–14).

It was under Solomon’s leadership that the temple was built—the symbol of God’s earthly presence. As the focal point of the community’s religious experience, the temple became central to prayer as well, playing a major role in Israel’s sacrificial system, as well as in corporate prayer for the nation. It is more evident now, than ever before, that for Israel prayer was a community action practiced within the context of worship, and most often in the sanctuaries of worship (Grenz 2005, 10).

Israel under the Prophets

How did prayer change during the time of the prophets?

To this point, prayer in the Old Testament was closely linked to the sacrificial system. The sacrifices of the people were to be accompanied by prayer. Eventually, however, prayer came to be elevated above sacrifice. The prophets, especially, began to place emphasis on an inner piety that was more than ritual sacrifice (Grenz 2005, 11).

God’s chosen prophets spoke the very words God gave them to deliver, so they of necessity were individuals of prayer. Even a cursory reading of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Jonah, and Habakkuk reveal that prayer played a significant role in the lives of these special messengers of God. Although specific mention of prayer is missing from some of the Minor Prophets, it is plain that they had audience with God and heard from Him directly. Of necessity, prophets prayed; sometimes they even prayed for those against whom they prophesied. Intimately acquainted with the divine intent for the future, they knew better than anyone what to pray for. A recurring theme of the prophets’ prayers was a call to repentance, in response to God’s word: “ ‘If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land’ ” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

How was Elijah an example of powerful prayer?

Few prophets have gained such recognition for their powerful and effective praying as did Elijah. When he prayed in faith to his God (the name *Elijah* signifies “My God is Yahweh”), the results were remarkable. Even James uses Elijah as an example of one who could pray and expect to see powerful results. As a representative of God, Elijah

enjoyed communion with Him and regularly received direction from Him. Such communion is seen vividly on Mt. Carmel, the location of one of his most famous prayers. In this duel, Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal stood before the people to prove who was God: the Lord or Baal. The prophets of Baal prayed for hours to no avail, but when Elijah began to pray, the fire instantly fell from heaven and consumed the offering. Elijah's sole purpose was to turn the heart of this people back to the true God (1 Kings 18). A remarkable man of prayer, Elijah apparently passed on his purpose to his mentoree, Elisha. Both saw the dead brought back to life as a result of their prayers (1 Kings 17:20–22; 2 Kings 4:32–35).

What effect did the exile have on Hebrew prayer?

Israel in the Exilic and Post-Exilic Periods

The trend toward elevating prayer to the center of Jewish piety peaked in the dispersion. This was due, in part, to the physical separation from the temple that occurred when the Israelites were deported from Palestine.

When the people no longer lived in proximity to the temple, and eventually when the temple was destroyed, the prayer of the pious Jew became the central aspect of the religious life of the Hebrews. Forms of prayer and regular times of prayer were developed, although place was also given to extemporaneous prayer. (Grenz 2005, 11)

During the exile, few could be more committed to prayer than Daniel. He stood resolute in his determination to pray, even when to do so meant being thrown into a den of lions. We also saw that Daniel relied on God for wisdom in interpreting the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (Daniel 2). The courage to pray at peril of death and to speak to the heads of state with such authority and assurance comes only from extended times in the place of prayer.

Two other individuals should be mentioned, Ezra and Nehemiah. Each grieved deeply for fellow Jews and voiced amazing prayers of intercession on behalf of the people (Ezra 9; Nehemiah 1:4–11). Nehemiah was indeed a man of prayer. His example in prayer was reflected in his ability to provide spiritual leadership to the Levites. Nehemiah's task had been to restore not only the city of Jerusalem, but the relationship of its people to God as well. Under his spiritual leadership, clearly marked by prayer, we see one of the greatest spiritual renewals in the history of Israel.

Lesson Objective

List and explain three themes, or overarching descriptions, of prayer in the Old Testament.

Prayer Themes of the Old Testament

Through the previous overview of Israel's major historical periods, several recurring themes can be identified regarding prayer in the Old Testament.

Prayer Was Primarily Leader Initiated

What three recurring themes can be identified regarding prayer in the Old Testament? Give an example of each one.

While certainly many ordinary individuals prayed to God, the overarching pattern was that prayer was primarily the task of Israel's spiritual leaders, offered to God on the people's behalf. Only the priests were allowed to enter the inner sanctuaries of the tabernacle and temple where God dwelled. Only the high priest, once a year, could enter the Most Holy Place. God called the prophets, who were to remain in communication with Him, to be His spokespersons to the people. We see this trend changing by the close of the Old Testament and its complete reversal in the New Testament.

We can take heart. The examples of prayerful leaders such as Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon, Elijah, Daniel, and Nehemiah are clear: for those willing to be led, guidance is readily available. The committed heart and the trained ear do not find it difficult to hear the Lord's gentle voice saying, "This is the way; walk in it" (Isaiah 30:21).

Prayer Was Primarily Community Oriented

Not only was prayer often initiated by leaders, but rather than being personal in nature, prayer was often offered on behalf of the people, corporately. While obviously many personal or individual prayers were uttered, a central theme of Old Testament prayers was intercession for the nation, seeking God's forgiveness, deliverance, mercy, direction, and victory.

Prayer was a community action, practiced within the context of worship. The tabernacle first, then the temple, existed as corporate sanctuaries of worship and symbols of God's earthly presence. Israel viewed prayer as a community task, based on a

community consciousness. The faithfulness of God in the past, such as His provision in the Exodus, came to be a significant motivation for community-oriented prayer.

Prayer Was Primarily Issue Driven

While the Old Testament certainly contains prayers that are more relationally oriented, more often than not, prayer in the Old Testament was initiated because of some specific need. What was unique about this, however, was that there was no need or issue the Israelites felt they could not bring to God. The Old Testament viewed prayer as encompassing all areas of life. Prayers were offered to God, requesting Him to forgive, provide, deliver, heal, protect, and act.

Sometimes prayer was offered in response to physical needs: the Israelites needed food and water in the wilderness or in times of famine; in their barrenness, women cried out to God for a baby; a widow's dead son needed a miracle; and so on. Sometimes prayer was offered to secure God's guidance in the selection of leadership, or His provision of victory in battle. On some occasions, prayer requested God's judgment against evil, or against Israel's enemies. It seems that such prayers were provoked by a holy jealousy for God and His cause. David prayed this way (Psalm 109:7, 14–15), as did Nehemiah (Nehemiah 4:4–5).

A vast majority of Old Testament prayer revolved around people turning to God. Repeatedly Israel's leaders went to God on behalf of the people, pleading for revival and restoration, which were promised to follow genuine repentance. In every instance, prayer was a prerequisite for spiritual renewal and revival. Whatever the need, the nation of Israel took it to the sovereign Lord, their personal God, who heard and answered their prayer.

Old Testament Prayer Established Relationship with God

Although there are no commands about prayer in the Old Testament as there are in the New Testament, prayer is prominently interwoven in the supernatural dealings of God with His people. The examples of the patriarchs, kings, prophets, and other leaders are sufficient evidence that prayer was understood to be a basic means of establishing a relationship with God. The Creator is ever seeking to restore fellowship with humankind, even though He may at various times use different means to commune intimately with those who obey His word and desire to know Him. As we will see in the

following section, communion with God has never been more directly available for those who would seek His face.

Prayer in the New Testament Lesson 2.1

An understanding of the role of prayer among the Old Testament people of God provides an important background for appreciating the prayer life of the New Testament church. While it was the context out of which the church's prayer life developed, we shall see that several of the overarching characteristics of prayer in the Old Testament underwent significant changes in the New Testament. We will compare the three broad themes of the Old against the New.

Lesson Objective

List three themes, or overarching descriptions, of prayer in the New Testament, comparing and contrasting each one with that of the Old Testament.

Prayer Is Believer Initiated

What are the three themes or over-arching themes of prayer in the New Testament, and how do they compare to those of the Old Testament?

Throughout the Old Testament, we saw that prayer was leader initiated. The tabernacle and the temple were set up as earthly sanctuaries, containing the Holy of Holies, where only the priests could enter. Even though God had provided in the pattern of these sanctuaries a profound picture of access to himself, His children in the Old Testament never did enjoy the access that is ours today. They had but the shadow; we have the reality.

The New Testament builds on this theme, showing its fulfillment in the work of Christ on the Cross. As a result, New Testament believers now have direct access to the Father, through prayer (John 16:23–28). Consider the following verses:

When Christ came as high priest ... he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made.... He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11–12)

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. (Hebrews 10:19–22)

As a result of the work of Christ on the Cross, every single believer has access to the throne of God at any time without having to go through a human mediator. Furthermore, thanks to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church, we actually have the indwelling presence of God's Spirit in our hearts.

At Pentecost a fundamental change was made in the economy of God; the church, the body of Christ, became God's temple. For this reason prayer can be directed to God through the whole world, wherever the people of God find themselves, for they now are the symbol of God's earthly presence. (Grenz 2005, 11)

Prayer Is Both Community and Individually Oriented

Prayer in the Old Testament had been community-oriented, but in the New Testament the role of prayer broadens and now becomes *both* corporate and individually oriented.

Like Israel in the Old Testament, the early church [still] viewed prayer as a community task based on a community consciousness. For the church, this specifically included an awareness of being part of the fellowship of people who belong to God through Jesus Christ. (Grenz 2005, 9)

But the teaching of the New Testament expanded the personal element as well. Since individual believers have direct access to the throne of God, the role of prayer takes on new significance. Because we now have the privilege of taking any issue to the Father, at any time, prayer has taken on more of a personal focus, allowing God to speak and work individually in our lives, so we can enjoy a personal relationship with our Father. We have the joy of developing intimate communion with our Savior.

The Western church today tends to emphasize the individualized nature of prayer. While fundamentally a wonderful privilege, it should be remembered that this is a

relatively new practice in terms of the history of the church, and it cannot be enjoyed at the expense of failing to remember that prayer is also still a community responsibility.

For the first several centuries, the church generally preferred that worshippers use written rather than spontaneous prayers, which allowed for control over doctrine during a time when heresies abounded. Centuries passed before silent, private prayers—the norm today for many—became widespread. Until the thirteenth century, most people both prayed and read aloud, even in private. (Augustine marveled at the ability of Bishop Ambrose to hold a book in silence with his eyes running over the page: Was he trying to save his voice?) When the skill of reading silently became widespread it also led to a surge in individual, private prayer; until then believers viewed both prayer and reading as group activities, guided by professionals. (Yancey 2006, 192)

In today's individualistic society, it is common to overlook the congregational nature of prayer in both the Old and New Testaments. Most of what the Bible says about prayer is addressed to groups of people, meeting as groups to pray. The Bible's great book of prayer, the Psalms, was written largely for use in the congregation of Israel. Even the individual prayer of a man like Ezra had the effect of moving all the people to pray together. "While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly" (Ezra 10:1). Likewise, threatened by persecution, the church in Jerusalem "raised their voices together in prayer to God" for Him to show His power against their enemies (Acts 1:14; 4:23–31). It was in a congregational prayer meeting that a missionary movement was launched in Antioch (Acts 13:1–3) (Patterson 2001, 160–161).

Corporate prayer lifts us out of the limited perspective of our individual needs and desires and provides us with a broader vision for our response to God. "Unless our individual prayer life exists within the greater support structure of the prayers of the saints, it will tend to become very narrow, individualized and privatized, and we will shy away from yielding control of our existence for God's purposes in our world" (Mulholland 1993, 108).

Christians today must learn to appreciate both, and maintain a balance between the personal and community aspects of prayer. Soren Kierkegaard said Jesus does two things when He sees a crowd: The first is to disperse it and isolate each individual one-on-one with himself. Having done that, the second thing He does is to reintroduce all these individuals to one another as brothers and sisters, making a crowd into a

community. A true Christian community is always a community of prayer (Patterson 2001, 163). Some believers who were raised in a tradition that emphasized the individual nature of prayer—the saint alone in his or her prayer closet and on his or her knees, as the pinnacle of great prayer—may need to ask God to help them regain a fresh appreciation for the importance of corporate prayer.

Prayer Is Relationally Driven

As discussed, throughout much of the Old Testament, prayer was issue-driven. Even at its furthest development, the prayer of the pious Jew tended to focus on the forms of prayer and regular times of prayer (rituals). This development formed a background to Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees on this subject. It is not the forms of prayer themselves that are important, Jesus declared, but rather the spirit behind the prayer.

While the New Testament believer is certainly still able to bring any issue to the Father, our prayer life can go so much beyond that. We have the opportunity for Him to speak into our lives personally, directing, guiding, molding, and shaping our very souls! Spiritual transformation at the deepest levels can be ours. Just like in the Old Testament, the most important relational issue is the fact that prayer remains a prerequisite for spiritual renewal and revival.

Prayer in the Life and Teachings of Christ

Lesson Objective

Discuss the prayer life of Jesus, identifying the two areas in which prayer was foundational for Him.

A well-known business axiom says, “If you want to know something, ask an expert.” If you want to know about basketball, ask Michael Jordan. If you want to know about golf, ask Tiger Woods. If you want to understand the computer business, ask Bill Gates. It makes sense then, if you want to learn good prayer habits, to study the number-one expert—Jesus Christ.

The Prayer Life of Jesus

Prayer was indeed a fundamental and central feature of Jesus' own life. The Gospels, especially Luke, portray Him as a Person of prayer. Christ modeled prayer as foundational to His life in two areas: His relationship with God and His earthly ministry.

How did Jesus model prayer as foundational to His life?

First, Jesus demonstrated the importance of prayer in His personal relationship with God. Scripture indicates His commitment to and dependency on prayer. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Sometimes He spent full nights in prayer (Luke 6:12). Other references show that this was a regular discipline in His life: “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16; see also 9:18; 21:37; 22:39, 41; Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46). It should be noted that while Jesus regularly prayed alone, He also prayed with others (Mark 14:32–42; Luke 9:28).

Second, Jesus demonstrated the importance of prayer to His earthly ministry. At significant junctures in His ministry, prayer played a particularly vital role. These junctures include His baptism, His temptation in the wilderness, the choosing of the Twelve, His blessing of little children, the Transfiguration, the raising of Lazarus, and the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 1:35; 14:32–42; Matthew 26:36–46; Luke 6:12; 9:28; 22:39–46). Recognizing the importance of prayer to ministry, Jesus instructed His disciples “that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1).

What was the result of Christ’s life of prayer? The writer of Hebrews reveals that God heard His prayers. “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions ... and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Hebrews 5:7). God honored Jesus’ prayers which were offered in an attitude of humble submission to the will of God.

Lesson Objective

State three important principles for today based on Jesus’ teaching regarding prayer.

What three principles from Jesus’ teachings can we use today?

The Prayer Teachings of Jesus

Jesus said much on the subject of prayer. Entire volumes have been devoted to Jesus’ teachings on prayer. Many of His teaching are integrated throughout this entire text, so the following paragraphs will simply whet your appetite by highlighting a few of His many instructions for how to pray effectively.

Jonathan Edwards and the Symphony of Prayer

After the first Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards challenged the church in New England to a concerted “symphony” of prayer. Three churches in Ipswich, Massachusetts covenanted to follow the pattern he suggested. In each congregation, cell groups would meet weekly to agree in prayer. Monthly, the separate congregations would then gather the cells and conduct all-church prayer meetings of agreement. Then quarterly, all three would come together for the same kind of praying. This pattern was followed faithfully, without interruption, for one hundred years! Two remarkable things happened during this time. All three churches reported a periodic harvest or “ingatherings” of souls when there would be a number of new believers brought into the congregations, about every eight to ten years. Also, during this time, all of New England was being swept by Unitarianism. But not these three churches. They remained firmly true to the faith while apostasy swirled around them, but not over them. Around the time of the Civil War, the prayer meetings ceased. Within five years these churches all capitulated to Unitarianism. The lesson is clear: in times of intense spiritual conflict, simple, unified corporate prayer can be literally the difference between life and death. (Patterson 2001, 164–165)

First, from the teaching of Jesus, we learn that to be effective in prayer, we must abide in Him. As we abide in Him, our prayer lives have incredible potential! Jesus said, “Ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.” The condition for that kind of answered prayer is in the line that precedes it: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you” (John 15:7). Remaining in Jesus is the condition. The Greek word for *remaining* means literally “to dwell” or “to take up residence” (Patterson 2001, 147). Jesus was saying that prayer must flow out of a relationship of fellowship and communion with Him. Answered prayer comes from His living in us and our living in Him. God honors prayer that is patterned after the prayer life of Jesus himself. His whole life was lived in total and unbroken communion with God. There was absolutely no distinction between His will and His Father’s will (John 5:19; 8:29; 11:41–42).

Second, from the teaching of Jesus, we learn that to be effective in prayer, we must have unity within the Christian community. Jesus said in Matthew 18:19: “Again, I tell you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” The Greek word for “agree” is *sumphoneo*, from which we get our word “symphony.” There is unlimited potential in simple, unified corporate prayer.

Recognizing the potential of corporate unity to prayer, Jonathan Edwards urged the churches of eighteenth-century New England to see prayer as a kind of concert. He proposed that the church pray in concerted agreement for two things: the revival of religion in the church and the spread of God's kingdom in the world. The Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were birthed in this kind of prayer. With them came spiritual renewal and profoundly beneficial social and political changes.

Third, from the teaching of Jesus, we learn that believers today can expect to do even greater works than He, when we ask in His name. Jesus made it clear that the believer would continue what He had been doing, and in fact, would do even greater things than Jesus (John 14:12–14). (“Greater” probably refers to scope and quantity rather than quality. For example, Peter preached and 3,000 people were saved in one day!) This became possible because Jesus was going to the Father, and He will do whatever is asked in His name, in order to bring glory to the Father. Notice the close connection between the promise, “Ask anything and I will do it” and the needed attitude of prayer “in my name.” To pray “in Jesus’ name” means to ask what Jesus would ask, for what would bring honor and glory to God. The book of Acts, and the subsequent history of the church is evidence of the fulfillment of this promise.

Following in the Footsteps of the Master

Jesus’ life was pervasively and deeply characterized by prayer. His life regularly included solitude, fasting and meditation for the sake of intense, internal focus and spiritual communion. If Jesus needed to engage in such activities and learn obedience (Hebrews 5:8), how much more so do we? As followers of Jesus, we must be just as deeply characterized by the same intentionality in developing our prayer lives. Pastor Jack Hayford said, “To learn to live in the spirit of prayer is to learn to walk in the presence of Jesus. Always” (Hayford 2001, 194).

Prayer in the Early Church

Lesson Objectives

Identify the ramifications that Jesus’ prayer life has on the believer today.

Lesson Objectives

List the six characteristics of prayer in the early church, as seen in Acts.

An overview of the book of Acts quickly reveals the high priority the early church placed on prayer. The following section will highlight six characteristics of the role of prayer in the early church.

1. Prayer Was a Common Feature of the Church's Worship and Lifestyle

In what six ways did prayer play a role in the early church?

Throughout the first century of the church, prayer was engaged in by the entire church—leaders and members alike. From the beginning, corporate prayer was common. “They all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). They gathered daily to worship and pray: “They devoted themselves to ... prayer” (Acts 2:42). But it was not limited to corporate prayer; personal prayer was also common. Throughout Acts, prayer was the regular practice of individual believers. Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray at three o'clock in the afternoon, which was the normal routine, when they encountered the crippled beggar (Acts 3:1). Cornelius was a devout man who “prayed to God regularly” (Acts 10:2). Peter was saying his noon prayers when he had his vision (Acts 10:9). Church leaders were praying in Antioch when God spoke to them about Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3).

Time and time again, it was as believers were involved in their normal practice of prayer that God spoke to them or worked through them in some miraculous way. They did not pray simply because they had a need; conversely, as they consistently prayed, God revealed himself in incredible ways. Regular commitment to prayer is a key discipline for Christian growth. This is especially true for leaders, who should lead the way in making prayer a spiritual priority.

Can the church today be characterized as a praying church? It is my observation that this is often not the case—either individually or corporately. Surveys indicate that the average Christian prays approximately three to five minutes per day. Furthermore, in some churches' midweek prayer meetings, almost anything but prayer happens. There are announcements, singing, and devotional exhortations. If a closing prayer is offered, it is usually only by the leader—and that is in the churches that actually have *prayer meetings* in their schedules! Many more make no pretense even to have a church prayer meeting. If it is true that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12), then we must pray. In 1

Timothy 2:1, Paul encourages the church to have many kinds of prayers as part of their public worship. “Can there be any other way to reach a lost world? Do we really think our humanly devised plans and programs can bring down dark strongholds of spiritual evil in heavenly realms?” (Patterson 2001, 159). We must pray personally, and we must pray as a body.

2. Prayer Was the Vehicle by Which the Holy Spirit Was Poured Out

Jesus had told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5). So the disciples waited and “they all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). The diversity of the disciples who met to pray is noteworthy. Not only did it include the original list of disciples (minus Judas Iscariot; see Luke 6:14–15), but it also included women and members of Jesus’ family (many of whom earlier had not believed in His ministry). Mention of each of these groups is significant. The Spirit would be poured out on all of the disciples, not just a few leaders.

In this atmosphere of prayer the initial outpouring occurred on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4). Subsequent outpourings of the Spirit also occurred in a context of prayer, such as when Peter and John prayed for the other believers to be filled: “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31). Again, the church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to the new believers in Samaria: “When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ... then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14–17). Paul was praying when he was baptized in the Spirit (Acts 9:11–19). After the Day of Pentecost, the church was revolutionized. They went forth with renewed confidence. Everything that they did was preceded, bathed in, and followed by prayer.

3. Prayer Was the Vehicle for Miracles, Signs, and Wonders

The book of Acts reveals that the early church regularly experienced the miraculous. “Many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles” (Acts 2:43). Clearly, that prayer—their close communion with God—was the source of empowerment for signs and wonders. Peter prayed and God raised Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:40). The church prayed earnestly and Peter got out of prison (Acts 12:5–12). Peter and John amazed the Sanhedrin with their courage when they were called upon to give an explanation for their miracles and preaching. After all, they had not been to Bible

school, “they were unschooled” (Acts 4:13) men. They were not qualified to speak in an earthly sense, but Luke sheds insight when he comments that the Sanhedrin “took note that *these men had been with Jesus*” (Acts 4:13, emphasis added). This is all we ever really need to do the work of Jesus. The best thing we have to offer the world is not a degree, not the communication classes we have taken, not the books we have read, not the success seminars and motivational workshops we have attended, but the fruit of our walk with the Lord—what is borne in us from the time we have spent with Him. “That is why Dwight L. Moody said he would rather learn how to pray than how to preach. For Jesus’ disciples never asked him to teach them how to preach, but how to pray” (Patterson 2001, 28).

The disciples desired to operate in the power of the Holy Spirit, and they prayed for a continuous, fresh, empowering of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:30). More specifically, they prayed that God would “heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders” through them (Acts 4:30). Sometimes I think we fail to see the miraculous simply because we fail to ask God for it. Recently I was speaking at a conference on the West Coast. In one of the evening services, I felt prompted of the Lord to have a time of prayer for physical healing. As the service closed we had a time for testimonies of healing. One woman, who had received a dramatic healing, caught my interest with the following comment. “As I kneeled there and asked God to heal me, He gently said to me, ‘I have been wanting to heal you, I have just been waiting for you to ask.’ ”

4. Prayer Was a Means of Confirming and Commissioning God’s Choice of Leadership

The early church regularly sought God in the confirming and commissioning of leadership. The disciples prayed about who should be Judas’ replacement (Acts 1:24). When the church chose seven men (full of the Spirit) to help carry out the logistics of the church, the apostles prayed for the seven to dedicate them to their ministry (Acts 6:6).

Another striking example is that of the launching of the ministries of Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–4). The leaders of the church in Antioch had been fasting and praying when the Holy Spirit told them, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). Saul and Barnabas had already received God’s call to preach the gospel and now God used a prophetic utterance to confirm His call and indicate His timing. Following this prophetic commissioning, again the church body fasted and prayed together with Saul and Barnabas. Assured that this was indeed the will of God, the united church prayed over Saul and Barnabas and sent them off

(Acts 13:3). The church ordained them or simply recognized God's call on their lives and sent them on their way with blessing and good will. As they traveled, they were "sent on their way by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:4). From the start Barnabas and Saul could always know that they ministered not by their own initiative but God's. The Holy Spirit would be with them throughout their travels, giving direction, protection, and encouragement.

5. Prayer Was the Vehicle for Divine Guidance

The early church received specific directions and divine guidance through prayer. Philip was also the recipient of divine guidance, which led to the salvation of an important Ethiopian official (Acts 8:26–40). Cornelius prayed to God regularly, and it was during a time of prayer that God told him to call for Peter (Acts 10:2–5). Ironically, on his way to meet Cornelius, Peter was praying when the Lord gave him the vision and led him miraculously to Cornelius (Acts 10). At the Jerusalem council the leaders prayed for guidance in their decision. They concluded, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

As Paul traveled on his missionary journeys, he was regularly guided by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1–2, 4). One time Paul's travel plans were changed when he was kept by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia (Acts 16:6). So, he then tried to go to the large Roman cities on the coast of the Black Sea in the province of Bithynia. But again, the Spirit would not allow him to (Acts 16:7). Notice, Paul is stepping out; he and his companions "tried to go" but each time the Spirit closed the door. Not knowing where to go, the missionary team turned toward Troas. One night while at Troas, Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man who urged him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." The team took this as God's guiding and set their sights on the West (Acts 16:9–10).

God still leads this way today. I have a good friend who heads up an international missions organization. He regularly receives divine guidance in his ministry endeavors. For example, once he was driving down the streets of a capital city in a certain country and God said, "Go to the next street and turn left. Now, go two blocks and turn right. Go into that building on the corner, up to the second floor, and in the back of the room you will meet someone I need you to talk to." He followed God's instructions, which led him to the president's wife of the country who, following their conversation, connected him with government officials who were able to open doors (previously slammed shut) for his ministry. We serve a great, wonderful God!

6. Prayer Was the Church's Response to Persecution and Opposition

The first-century Christians faced a tremendous amount of persecution. Interestingly, the book of Acts reveals that the church's response to persecution was prayer. Having been threatened by the Sanhedrin, Peter and John rejoined the believers and reported what had happened. When the believers heard the report, "They raised their voices together in prayer ... 'Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness' " (Acts 4:23–29). Notice that they did not pray for protection, but for power. They did not pray for deliverance from the situation, but for continued boldness in the face of opposition. Their request was to speak the Word with boldness! With no thought of themselves, their primary concern was to preach Christ and bring glory to Him.

Again, prayer was the church's first response to the imprisonment of Peter (Acts 12:4–11). From an earthly perspective, things looked impossible for Peter. He was heavily guarded. Herod had sixteen soldiers guarding Peter, four for each watch. Two were chained to Peter, one on each side. Two were watching the door. Why would Herod have put Peter under such heavy guard? Because he remembered what happened last time Peter was in prison—he escaped (5:19). Somehow, Peter had mysteriously escaped (an angel let them out)! Herod was not about to let that happen again. But the church was "earnestly praying" (12:5). Prayer was the turning point of this story. Even though Peter was guarded, again he was miraculously released because the church was praying.

For many western Christians, the notion of persecution for a person's faith is a distant concept. Yet, in many parts of the world where Christians are persecuted and harassed for their faith, it is a daily reality. Even as I write these words, one of my students, a young Punjabi Indian woman, has just received death threats because of her faith in Christ. For these dear saints, the prayer meeting is central to church life. Everyone shows up, the meetings often last long into the night, and it is not unusual for believers to arise daily before sunup to pray together for the work of the church. For them, prayer is a matter of survival.

Five Principles Regarding Guidance

Some important principles regarding guidance can be gleaned from the account of Paul and Barnabas. First, guidance comes when we are seeking God. This involves dedicated prayer and fasting. Second, we should have godly believers seeking God with us. God will confirm through others what He has already spoken to us. Third, as we step out in faith, God is faithful to keep us on course. Paul was actively seeking God's will (he did not just sit there until he saw handwriting on wall). As we attempt to carry out the apparent will of God, we can trust that God will continue to lead us. Fourth, the legitimate leading of the Holy Spirit may at first appear "negative." Negative leading (closing doors) is a way of keeping us in God's will. Rather than being disappointed when God closes doors, we must come to see it as His leading our lives. Fifth, the Holy Spirit can give us a vision of the need to be met. Paul's vision was of the need, not of the Lord. It is still just as much a call from the Lord, when He gives us a burden for a specific need.

The early church understood the connection of prayer with the miraculous and we should too. We have a responsibility to pray for our brothers and sisters who are suffering for their faith. My young son Joshua and daughter Natalie, pray every single night for the persecuted church. This sensitivity came firsthand two summers ago, while traveling in Indonesia. There we met a local pastor, who just weeks later, was imprisoned for his faith. He still has two years to serve on his term, and we are still praying. Never underestimate the power of a praying church!

Prayer Is the Key to Successful Leadership

In purely human terms, the early church had nothing, yet its success was phenomenal! In many ways the early church did not have the resources we do today. No big budgets and wealthy donors. No academic credentials for their leaders. No endorsement of influential political leaders. In fact, most of their leaders had jail records! Yet a handful of committed believers took the gospel to the ends of the earth. So what was the secret to their success? They knew how to pray. Because of their

dedication to prayer, the disciples spoke forth boldly the gospel message of Christ and the number of disciples increased rapidly (as many as 3,000 in one day and 5,000 another!).

What role does prayer play in the church today?

When believers are prayerfully reaching out to the lost—and seeking God for signs and wonders in order to accomplish this—people will respond to the powerful message of Christ. Notice that the early disciples had not taken the latest “Church Growth” seminar. Sometimes we spend all of our time looking for a method that will be a quick-fix and easy answer. It is not that well-thought-out methods are wrong, but maybe if we spent more time in prayer we would see more results.

Especially for those in leadership, the key to successful ministry is prayer. The apostles realized that all of their time was being spent on things that were not their highest priority—prayer and proclamation of the Word (Acts 6:1–6). Even today, some church leaders are so busy with secondary tasks that they fail to spend adequate time in prayer and study of the Word. This creates a spiritual deficiency in the church, which makes it easy for problems to develop.

Prayer is not an escape from responsibility; rather, it is our response to God’s ability. May we challenge each other to be people—and leaders—of prayer.

When asked the secret of his remarkable ministry, British preacher Charles Spurgeon replied: “My people pray for me.”

The Holy Spirit’s Assistance in Prayer Lesson

2.3

The presence and work of the Holy Spirit is crucial and central in praying. The Letter of Jude directs us to build ourselves up in holy faith and “pray in the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). It is possible to pray in the flesh, according to human motives, as James says (James 4:3), in which case prayer comes to nothing. Or, we can pray according to the Spirit. The following section highlights five of the many ways in which the Holy Spirit assists in prayer.

Lesson Objective

Identify five ways in which the Holy Spirit assists us in our prayer lives.

1. The Holy Spirit Baptizes Us

What are the five ways the Holy Spirit helps us in prayer?

When we accept Christ as Savior, we receive the Holy Spirit at that time (for examples read Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13). However, Scripture speaks of an additional experience that happens to believers following their conversion, referred to as being “baptized in the Spirit,” or being “filled with the Spirit.” This is a transforming experience by which a person is further empowered by the Spirit for Christian life and service. This experience has rich scriptural background. A new work of the Spirit was promised in the Old Testament (Isaiah 42, 44:3; 32:15; 61:1; Ezekiel 36:22–32; Joel 2). More specifically, the baptism in the Spirit was promised in the Gospels (Matthew 3:11; 12:28; John 1:33; Luke 3:21; 10:21), and Jesus promised that He would be sending the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; John 7:38–39; 15:26; 20:22; Acts 1:4–8). The fruition of this promise is seen throughout the experience of the early church (Acts 2:1–4; 2:16–17, 33, 38–39; 8:14–17; 9:17–19; 19:1–6; 11:15–18; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Corinthians 14:18, 39)

Some assume that this was fulfilled in some final capacity on the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2:4. However, the early apostles did not operate under this assumption. Repeatedly throughout the book of Acts and the epistles, believers were encouraged to seek this experience. Peter and John prayed for Samaritan converts to receive the experience, quite some time following their conversion (Acts 8:12–16). Paul prayed with the Ephesian believers to receive the baptism in the Spirit, long after they had believed (Acts 19:1–6). Paul had encountered Christ three days earlier on the road to Damascus, and then Ananias came saying, “The Lord ... has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17).

The baptism in the Spirit is accompanied by the physical sign of speaking in a language that one has not previously learned (known as “tongues”). In all of the Acts accounts of infilling of the Holy Spirit where accompanying evidences are spelled out, tongues is always one of them (Acts 2:4; 10:44–48; 19:1–7). Where the evidence was not spelled out, tongues are possible, or other considerations point to the probability of tongues (Acts 8:14–19; 9:17–18). What is the significance of speaking in tongues? There could be several possible reasons why God chose tongues as a sign of Spirit baptism: it is an external observable evidence; it is a uniform evidence; it is a symbol of the Holy Spirit’s control in one’s life; tongues signify the universal nature of the gospel; and,

tongues are symbolic of the purpose of Spirit baptism (empowerment for Christian witness).

All believers are entitled to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and therefore should earnestly seek the promise of the Father, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are several reasons for seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit. First, it provides motivation and power for Christian service/witness (Acts 1:8). Second, it opens a new avenue of prayer and praise (1 Corinthians 14:2). Third, it edifies the believer (1 Corinthians 14:4). Finally, the bottom line is that God desires every believer to speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5). He would not have designed this experience if He did not see the benefit for our enriching our personal and prayer lives.

2. The Holy Spirit Helps Us in Our Weaknesses

Prayer should be as natural to the spiritual person as breathing is to the physical person. The believer who walks with God will always be in conversation with Him. However, that does not mean that we will never have any problems in prayer, or that there are never any barriers. The limitations of our flesh create prayer problems. “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Mark 14:38). The limitations of our minds create prayer problems: “We do not know what we ought to pray for” (Romans 8:26). Into these limitations God sends His Spirit to assist us.

As humans, we have weaknesses. What is the solution to human weakness? The “Spirit *helps* us.” The picture given here is that of a man bearing on his shoulders a burden too heavy to be borne. The Holy Spirit comes, not to take the burden away, not even to give us strength to bear it, but to put His almighty shoulder under it, along with ours. He does not change the load, or lift the burden. We still feel it and sense it, but He bears the heavier part of it. He lightens the load as He comes along beside us.

3. The Holy Spirit Intercedes for Us in God’s Will

I regularly teach and speak overseas. Over the years, I have often had to rely on translators in order to communicate my message. A poor translator can turn my best efforts into nonsense (I can tell by the confused looks on their faces). Conversely, a good translator can turn even my most stumbling attempts into a communication success. Paul promises us that in prayer we have the perfect translator, so that even our wordlessness finds its way to the Almighty Father. “We do not know what we ought to

pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” and “the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:26–27).

We experience weaknesses and limitations in prayer because we are still in the fleshly house that is awaiting its change to glory (Romans 8:18–23). Our souls have been redeemed, but we are still saddled with this flesh and all of its limitations. The good news is that the Holy Spirit provides the means by which we transcend our prayer limitations, by interceding for us. The Greek term “intercedes” (*hyperentunchano*) means, “to make a petition, or intercede on behalf of another.” Where we are weak, He is strong. Where we are burdened, He comes along to help lift the load. Where we lack knowledge about how we should pray, He who is omniscient knows how to pray. The Spirit speaks directly with the Father and the Son on our behalf, according to the divine will.

4. The Holy Spirit Provides Spiritual Weaponry

Prayer involves warfare. Prayer is offensive. It is taking the enemy’s territory from him. Without it, there is no real spiritual progress or victory. Fortunately, God does not leave us alone and undefended; rather, He equips us for this battle. After outlining the various pieces of spiritual armor, Paul concludes with an over-arching battle tactic: “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions” (Ephesians 6:18). Prayer releases God’s power, and praying in the Spirit assists us in the battle. The Holy Spirit is our ally and helper in this battle, enabling the soldier to ward off the attacks of the enemy and make a stand against him. (We will study this further in Chapter 3).

The secret to successful prayer lies in those words “in the Spirit.” True prayer is in and from the Holy Spirit, breathed by the Holy Spirit. Spirit-breathed prayer brings us into the most intimate conversation and communion with God.

5. The Holy Spirit Builds Us Up

Read Jude 20 and 1 Corinthians 14:4. The world system endeavors to tear down our spiritual stamina. It assaults us, tempts us, allures us, degrades us, puts us down, and ridicules our testimony. We recognize that the enemy uses people to do this. But, as we just discussed, our battle is not with them, “flesh and blood,” but with the enemy himself, with principalities and powers.

In short, our spiritual reservoirs need building up, and praying in the Spirit does that. “But you, dear friends, build yourself up in the most holy faith and pray in the Holy

Spirit” (Jude 20). The presence and work of the Holy Spirit is crucial and central in praying. One way in which we can involve the Spirit is to pray in the prayer language given to us by the Spirit. When we pray in tongues, we edify, or build up, our spiritual self (1 Corinthians 14:4). It strengthens our spiritual defenses, and equips us to stand strong. This is not the only spiritual discipline that builds us up, but it is one of the most important.

How to Experience the Living Presence of the Holy Spirit

From an earthly perspective, the church in North America is the best-equipped in history. It has more money, more books, more media tools than the church in any other place on earth. Yet with all this, the church overall is shrinking, not gaining in numbers. One has to go to the poor regions of the earth to places like East Africa and Latin America, to find a growing church. Why? One reason is because we have not developed deep prayer lives. Our roots are shallow, and we cannot withstand the storms and tests of life. I believe Jesus’ words to Martha are more applicable today than ever: “You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed” (Luke 10:41–42). The only non-negotiable, essential element needed in our lives is to spend time with Jesus!

Sacred Reading

The ancient act of *lectio divina*, or “sacred reading,” has been practiced by the church since the fifth century. Today, it is being rediscovered in many parts of the Christian community. Sacred reading combines the disciplines of study, prayer, and meditation into a powerful approach that, when consistently practiced, can revolutionize one’s spiritual life. Sacred Reading consists of four elements:

- 1. Reading. Select a brief passage of Scripture and ingest it by reading it several times.**
- 2. Mediation. Take a few minutes to reflect on the words and phrases in the text you have read. Ponder the passage by asking several questions of the text.**
- 3. Prayer. Having internalized the passage, offer it back to God in the form of a personalized prayer.**
- 4. Contemplation. For many, this will be the most difficult part, since it consists of silence and yieldedness in the presence of God. Contemplation is the communion that is born out of the first three elements and our reception of divine truth in our minds and hearts. (Boa 2001, 96–97)**

As we spend time following in the footsteps of the Master, and the many saints of God who have gone before us, only then will we experience the living presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Our lives and churches will be characterized by all of those traits which followed the early church, including the ongoing empowerment of the Holy Spirit, miracles, signs and wonders, divine guidance, and the ability to stand strong in the face of opposition and persecution. May we be challenged to experience new depths in our prayer lives. May we become firmly rooted and grounded, with a strong foundation that allows us to rise to the full potential of what it means to be the people of God.

Taylor, C. (2006). Prayer and Worship: An independent-study textbook (pp. 28–46). Springfield, MO: Global University.

Chapter 3: Armed and Dangerous: The Power of Prayer

Does your prayer life consistently result in answered prayer? Do you regularly experience God's miraculous power flowing through you? Or, has your prayer life become stale and predictable? Possibly, you struggle to even find the time and energy for prayer at all. If your prayers lack passion and interaction, perhaps your perception of God is too small. The way we pray is a result of our view of God. When we do not really understand God's awesomeness and power, we pray in a way that does not actually expect Him to do the miraculous in and through us. Even though we are finite beings with human limitations, we serve the God who enables us to live beyond our own limits. He calls us to a life of bold faith, believing Him to do the extraordinary.

This chapter will consider the amazing power available to us through faith expressed in prayer. First, we will reflect on the greatness of our God. Next, we will discover just what can happen when we choose to live beyond our limits. Finally, we will consider various kinds of prayer available in our prayer arsenal to plunge us deeper into meaningful communication with God.

Lesson 3.1 Children of a Greater God

Objectives

- 3.1.1 Identify five common misconceptions about God that impact our prayer lives.*
- 3.1.2 Determine what your prayer life says about who you believe God to be.*
- 3.1.3 State the significance of serving God.*

Lesson 3.2 Living Beyond Your Limits

Objectives

- 3.2.1 State one reason why many Christians expect so little from God.*
- 3.2.2 List two keys for developing mountain-moving faith.*

3.2.3 *Relate what is meant by the phrase interrupting heaven.*

3.2.4 *Tell the significance of expecting God to do the extraordinary in your life.*

Lesson 3.3 An Arsenal in Your Closet

Objective

3.3.1 *State the role of diverse prayers in spiritual battle.*

3.3.2 *Summarize five expressions of prayer.*

Lesson 3.1 Children of a Greater God

George Lucas popularized the expression, “May the force be with you” in his Star Wars films. While the saying may be relatively new in church history, the notion of an impersonal ruler of the cosmos is not. Many Christians behave (and pray) as if God were an impersonal force, distant and detached from personal involvement in our lives. Why would anyone ignore the God of the universe, who offers us the pleasure of His company? One reason may be we simply do not understand just how personal God is. Or, subconsciously, some believers want to keep God distant. “Confine God to the cerebral cortex and He will not be able to mess up your plans. The more abstract and impersonal you can make him, the less demanding He will be” (Patterson 2001, 69).

C.S. Lewis wrote this in his book *Miracles*:

Men are reluctant to pass over from the notion of an abstract deity to the living God. [An abstract] God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven and earth should flee away at his glance. It is with a shock that we meet life where we thought we were alone. “Look out,” we cry, “it is alive.” And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back ... An impersonal God—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth, and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, King, husband—that is quite another matter. Here comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (man’s search for God) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing he had found us? (1996, 124–125)

The problem, however, is that the less demanding and personal we perceive God to be, the more boring He will seem and the less inclined we will be to spend time in prayer with Him. An abstract, indifferent God, on one hand, is a shrunken God in our minds. On the other hand, we may believe He is too big and therefore too busy to get involved with people. “But the God Jesus told us to pray to can both run the cosmos and knit a baby together in the mother’s womb. He can number both subatomic particles and the hairs on your head” (Patterson 2001, 71). Indeed, we are children of a great God.

The Starting Point: Our Understanding of God

Lesson Objective

Identify five common misconceptions about God that impact our prayer lives.

If prayer is our response to all God has revealed himself to be, then a good question to ask might be, “What does my prayer life say about who I believe God to be?” Does my prayer reflect the greatness of our almighty, sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, holy Creator? Or does my prayer life reflect a small, weak, distant, uninvolved God? Belief in a second-rate, impersonal God will result in a second-rate, impersonal prayer life, for our prayer flows out of our beliefs about God.

Our prayer life is directly related to our conscious (or subconscious) beliefs about God. An appropriate response to God is rooted in a right view of God, which must be informed by His Word. An incomplete or inaccurate image of God will impact our prayers. Many Christians hold a variety of misconceptions about God. A few of these misconceptions are highlighted in the following pages.

What are five common misconceptions about God that impact prayer negatively and what makes them invalid?

Misconception 1: God Has More Important Concerns than Me

Some Christians operate from the belief that the God Almighty, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, has much bigger and more important things to worry about than spending time with them. For instance, the mystic Meister Eckhart refused to “pray the rich and loving God for such trifles” as to help him recover from an illness. And Catherine of Genoa took pride in never asking anything for herself in thirty-five years of constant prayer.

This sense of insignificance could stem from a poor self-image, or from a sense of piety. Yet the Bible emphasizes God’s interest in every aspect of our lives. Even a cursory glance at the prayers of the Bible reveals that God responds to all sorts of “selfish” prayers: an infertile woman who wants a baby, a widow who needs more cooking oil, or a soldier who begs for victory in battle. People also pray for rain during a drought. The Lord’s prayer includes a plea for daily bread. Paul prays about safe travels, prosperous work, relief from a physical ailment, and boldness in preaching. James urges prayers for wisdom and physical healing. After reviewing the prayers in the Bible, it is safe to stop worrying about being too insignificant to God. “Since God counts on prayer as a primary way to relate to us, we could actually block potential intimacy by filtering out prayers that may not seem ‘spiritual’ enough” (Yancey 2006, 317–318).

Misconception 2: God Could Not Love Me as I Really Am

Others operate from the belief that they are unworthy of God's love and attention. They worry that past behavior has somehow disqualified them from deserving God's ravishing love. They may think, *When God sees me for who I really am, can I survive the contact?* Again, however, the Bible gives a detailed record of God listening to prayers from decidedly unworthy people: from short-fused Moses, to self-absorbed Samson to the rough sailors who threw Jonah overboard, let alone the moping prophet himself. God responded to King David's prayers of repentance after the sins of murder and adultery, as well as the desperation prayer of wicked King Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33:10–13). Jesus commended the prayer of an unworthy tax collector above that of an upright Pharisee. Philip Yancey emphasizes that a sense of unworthiness hardly disqualifies one from prayer; rather, it serves as a necessary starting point. Apart from feeling unworthy, why call on God in the first place? Unworthiness establishes the ground rules, setting the proper alignment between broken human beings and a perfect God. It should be considered a motivation for prayer, not a hindrance (Yancey 2006, 185).

Misconception 3: God Will Require Me to Do Things I Do Not Want to Do

Some fear what will happen if they come too close to God, and this fear of the unknown prevents them from seeking a close encounter of the most important kind. They may be afraid that God will ask them to give up certain relationships, life dreams, or things they enjoy. He may want to bring about growth that could be unpleasant or painful in the process. Still others fear that God might call them to go somewhere they do not want to go. Scott Wesley Brown's old song, "Please don't send me to Africa," expresses this sentiment held by many Western Christians, revealing their fear that God will send them to a primitive and remote place, far from home. The result of such fears is that we reject the excitement of God's nearness by keeping Him at arm's length. We avoid His embrace, choosing instead to communicate with God mainly so we can deliver our list of predictable prayer requests.

Granted, prayer is not a matter of getting God to do what we want Him to do, but rather one of God getting us to do what He wants us to do. When we experience close encounters with God, we *will* change, but we will also *want* to change. "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). Even during those times when we go through the Refiner's fire, we must not forget that the purpose is to purify and refine us for His purposes (see Malachi 3:3).

Misconception 4: God Is Either a Harsh Taskmaster or a Grandfatherly Type

Depending on their experience with their earthly fathers, and/or early teaching, some Christians perceive God as one of two extremes. First, some see Him as a strict disciplinarian. They are taught to talk to God with respectful reticence. They are so afraid of being penalized that even in desperate moments, they hold back from God. If we think that God is an angry tyrant, we will keep our distance from His throne. If we picture God exclusively as the Chief Justice of the heavenly Supreme Court, we will be disinclined to beg Him for mercy. Conversely, our communication with God will be impacted if we picture Him in overly sentimental and familiar images—like our kindly grandfathers. If God is merely my friend or a divine “Santa” to grant my wishes, then I will freely express my needs to Him, but not my worship (Roberts 2005, 8).

Misconception 5: God Either Cannot or Does Not Want to Answer My Prayers

Many believers have pressing needs, but they do not seek God for help because somewhere beneath the surface layer of faith and trust, they do not believe God has the power to do anything about their needs. While many Christians maintain an intellectual belief in God’s ability to answer prayer, it has not registered where it really counts, in heartfelt conviction. When our hearts are not persuaded, we do not pray because deep down we do not believe that God can (or will) answer.

It is one thing for us to simply agree with the proper doctrines of God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, but it is another thing entirely to *own* them, to move beyond mere mental assent to actually believing them. At some point, we must move beyond believing in something because it is what we have been taught, or because it is what scholars say, to believing it because we have experienced the reality. If we really did believe in God’s ability to answer prayer, we would take prayer much more seriously. If we have fallen into disbelief, our first prayer back toward God should be, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

Lesson Objective

Determine what your prayer life says about who you believe God to be.

All of these misconceptions will make us hesitate to seek God wholeheartedly. If you struggle with one of these issues, I encourage you to make it a matter of prayer and study. With a proper understanding of the nature of God these misunderstandings can be corrected!

Our God Is Omnipotent

To appreciate the scale of God's greatness, consider a few facts about our galaxy that He created:

If the Milky Way galaxy were the size of the entire continent of North America, our solar system would fit in a coffee cup. Even now two Voyager spacecrafts are hurtling toward the edge of the solar system at a rate of 100,000 miles per hour. For almost three decades they have been speeding away from earth, approaching a distance of 9 billion miles. When engineers beam a command to the spacecraft at the speed of light, it takes thirteen hours to arrive. Yet this vast neighborhood of our sun—in truth the size of a coffee cup—fits along with several hundred billion other stars and their universe. To send a light-speed message to the edge of that universe would take 15 billion years. It is no wonder the psalmist declared, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?” As humans, we are a mere pinch of dust scattered across the surface of a nondescript planet. In the face of such reality we can grovel in humility, or we can, like the psalmist, look up instead of down to conclude, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Yancey 2006, 20–21).

Lesson Objective

State the significance of serving God.

Even if we have lost sight of the greatness of our God, the exciting reality is that every time we step out in faith, our view of God is enhanced. In C.S. Lewis's book *Prince Caspian*, one of the children comes upon Aslan, the Christ figure of the Narnia stories, after a prolonged absence. “Aslan, you're bigger,” she says.

“That's because you're older, little one,” the lion answered. “Not because you are?” she asked.

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

What does your personal prayer life say about who you believe God to be?

So it is with God. Each time we step out in faith and spend time developing intimacy with Him, we learn in a fresh way His faithfulness and dependability and just what can be accomplished when we operate in His power. It is time we stop relating to the Lion of Judah as if He were a sleeping house cat.

Jesus is looking for people who hunger and thirst after Him. He seeks those whose ultimate goal is not comfort, but a desire for God who is so infinitely large that He will do extraordinary things through them. This is the opportunity of a lifetime: intimacy with the personal God—the great God—and it all starts with prayer.

Lesson 3.2 Living Beyond Your Limits

Even though we are finite beings with human limitations, we serve the God who enables us to live beyond our limits. He calls us to a life of bold faith, believing Him to do extraordinary things in and through us.

Lesson Objective

State one reason why many Christians expect so little from God.

What are the dangers of filling our lives with too much religious activity?

Expect More from God

If we consider the staggering magnitude of the God described in Scripture, why do we expect so little of Him? C.S. Lewis offers:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (Lewis 1996, 1–2)

The key lies in Lewis' last line: "We are far too easily pleased." We settle for filling our lives with less than God's best. It may not be limited to mere drink, sex, and ambition. Some of us may fill our lives with work, entertainment, or even church. We let the routines of church attendance and religious activities crowd out living and longing for the kingdom and glory of God. The fatigue from our religious activity—the endless meetings and gatherings and programs—can dull our appetite for God. "Quietly,

imperceptibly, we begin to expect less of him, and end up being satisfied with that. Good church people can stop wondering, ‘Why was it that wherever Paul went people rioted, but wherever we meet they serve coffee?’ ” (Patterson 2001, 58–59).

Lesson Objective

List two keys for developing mountain-moving faith.

Develop Mountain-Moving Faith

Instead of settling for *status quo*, we must have a holy hunger for God. We must not be satisfied until we experience His glory in the midst of life’s activities. The surest way to move in this direction is through prayer. As we lead a life of prayer, the Holy Spirit leads us to increasingly walk by faith (Galatians 5:18). The life of prayer leads us to new thresholds of faith and obedience. We escape from the comfort zone of the rational and comfortable to the exciting realm of bold faith.

How does a Christian develop mountain-moving faith?

Bold faith is mountain-moving faith. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, ... you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matthew 21:21–22). Believers can be confident that their prayers will be answered.

But how do we learn to pray with faith that can move mountains? Pastor Bill Hybels discusses two guiding principles. First, faith comes from looking at God, not at the mountain. God does not see the roadblock. He is ready to work in our lives. As we begin to focus on Him instead of the problem, He is able to work in and through us. Second, God gives us faith as we walk with Him. After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, when Israel was waiting to enter the Promised Land, one obstacle stood in their way—the Jordan River. God told Joshua to instruct the priests to carry the ark of the covenant and begin walking into the water. God did not give the priests any evidence that the waters would part. He did nothing until they put their feet in the water, taking the first step of commitment and obedience. Only then did He stop the flow of the river (Joshua 3 and 4). In the same way, mountain-moving faith will be given to us as we step out and follow the Lord’s leading. How do you pray a prayer so filled with faith that it can move a mountain? By shifting the focus from the size of your mountain to the sufficiency of the Mountain Mover, and by stepping forward in obedience.

It is probable that everyone reading this book is standing in the shadow of at least one mountain that will not budge: a destructive habit, a character flaw, an impossible work situation, a difficult relationship, or a physical limitation. What is your mountain? Have you stood in its shadow for so long that you have grown accustomed to the darkness? Do your prayers get sabotaged by futility? Alter the focus of your prayer. Instead of focusing on the mountain, turn your attention to the Mountain Mover—His glory, power, and faithfulness. Then, start walking in faith, following His leading, and watch that mountain step aside (Hybels 1998, 83–85).

Lesson Objective

Relate what is meant by the phrase interrupting heaven.

Interrupting Heaven: How Prayer Works

John Ortberg discusses the seriousness with which the writers of Scripture viewed prayer. In Revelation 8, the apostle John describes a scene in heaven where there was silence for about half an hour. During this time, an angel with a golden censer approached the altar and offered much incense, which is a representation of prayers arising from earth: “The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand” (Revelation 8:4). Following this came great acts of judgment on the earth. What is striking is that these acts come in response to the prayers of the saints! Usually we think of events on earth being interrupted because of actions taken in heaven. However, here it is the other way around. All of heaven comes to a standstill. The endless songs and praises of heavenly hosts suddenly stop because God’s people on earth are praying. The implication for us is this: our prayers matter; they rise before God and are heard. What happens next on earth happens because people pray. History belongs to the intercessors—those who believe and pray the future into being (Ortberg 2002, 93). We may never know the true effects of prayer this side of heaven, but we do know this: prayer changes things.

How are we God’s *prayer partners*?

In Numbers, God was so angered by the Israelites who had directly disobeyed Him and fallen into sin that He planned to wipe out all of them with a plague. Moses interceded on their behalf, pleading with God to spare their lives and forgive them for their wrong doings. The result? The Lord relented and forgave them. That is how strong our connection is with God. We actually have the ability to ask for good things with the

prospect that He may respond positively. This is not to say that we can manipulate the most omnipotent Being. Through the ages God's character has stayed the same: He is and always will be loving, forgiving, and just. This story illustrates that His relationships are not stagnant but dynamic. We do have an effect on God. There is a mystery in prayer that exceeds our understanding. The Sovereign Lord, the One who is all-knowing, all-wise, and all-powerful, has chosen to include us among His advisers. He not only listens to our prayers, He acts in response to them (Roberts 2005, 31).

So in reality, we become God's *prayer partners*. The very realization that God uses our seemingly feeble prayers to accomplish His will should fill us with awe and wonder. E. M. Bounds said, "God shapes the world by prayer." For some reason unknown to us, God has chosen to partner with His children. In the late nineteenth century William Carey felt a call to travel to India as a worker in the harvest. Pastors around him scoffed at his idea: "Young man, if God had wanted to save the heathen in India, he could certainly do it without the likes of you or us." They missed the point of partnership. God does very little on earth without the likes of you and us (Yancey 2006, 112). How astonishing that God chooses to use the prayers of His children to make things happen in both the earthly and the heavenly realms! What an exciting place to be, partnering with God to accomplish His will.

Lesson Objective

Tell the significance of expecting God to do the extraordinary in our lives.

Expect the Extraordinary

Sadly, many Christians do not see prayer for the powerful tool that it is. Prayer is not merely a religious duty meant to be taken lightly, but a dangerous, earth-shattering act, the powerful engine that God uses to accomplish His will on this earth. If our faith in God cannot believe Him for something bigger than us, then we have domesticated Him, and our faith is no longer in Him but in our religious activity.

There are exciting possibilities for the believer who dares to access God's unlimited provisions for His children. God calls you to partner with Him in a mission that is bigger than you are. God's mission for our life is bigger than anything we could do on our own. God calls us to God-sized tasks, things we could never do on our own. As we expect great things from God we should attempt great things for God!

Why is it important for us to expect God to do great things when we pray?

Consequently, we should come expectantly to the throne. The significance of prayer is not *what* we are asking, but *whom* we are addressing. Come with child-like trust to your Heavenly Father. Expect the supernatural—ask Him for something only He can do and watch what happens. “God’s voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding” (Job 37:5). “Prayer moves us from the safe and comfortable to the impossible and even miraculous areas of life and ministry. A life of prayer is a life of great adventure and unlimited potential” (Cedar 1998, 10).

Getting Out of the Boat

When Peter stepped out in faith and walked on the water, he discovered the joy of experiencing God’s power to accomplish something he could have never done on his own. Do you have a life challenge right now that is so large that you have no hope of meeting it apart from God? Do not be limited by physical circumstances, for we can do everything through him who give us strength (Philippians 4:13).

Jesus still looks for individuals who will get out of the boat and live above *sea level*. He still looks for those who refuse to focus on the storm instead of the Savior. He calls people whose goal is not to be comfortable but to do extraordinary things through Him. This is your chance to respond to a call that is bigger than you are—the call of a limitless God who wants to do God-sized things through you.

Spotlight: The Power of Prayer

Mary Slessor was a missionary to West Africa in the nineteenth century, where her work among orphans was nothing short of remarkable. Single and an activist, her days were long and arduous and at times lonely. She did the work of ten average people in her lifetime. But she named prayer, not mere *doing* as the real dynamic of her accomplishments. In letters home to her friends she wrote:

My life is one long, daily, hourly record of answered prayer. For physical health, or mental overstrain, for guidance given marvelously, for enmity to the gospel subdued, for food provided at the exact hour needed, for everything else that goes to make up life and my poor service ... I can testify with a full and often wonder-stricken awe that I ... know God answers prayer ... Prayer is the greatest power God has put into our hands for service. Praying is harder work than doing ... but the dynamic lies that way to advance the kingdom. I have no idea how and why God has carried me over so many hard places, and made these hordes submit to me ... except in answer to prayer

at home for me. It is all beyond my comprehension. The only way I can explain it is on the ground that I have been prayed for more than more. Pray on—power lies that way. (Patterson 2001, 26; quoting Basil Mill 130, 138)

Lesson 3.3 An Arsenal in Your Closet

Like most young boys, my son Joshua loves to play knights, soldiers, pirates, Revolutionary War, and so on. He is enthralled with anything that lets him use various weapons: swords, shields, breastplates, helmets, and strategic maps. The final battle scene from the *Chronicles of Narnia* is one of his favorites to re-enact; for this he must pull out all of the weapons from the toy arsenal in his closet.

Lesson Objective

State the role of diverse prayers in spiritual battle.

Why should Christians pray in a variety of ways?

While Joshua loves these play battles, it serves as a regular reminder for me that as believers we are engaged in an ongoing spiritual battle for which we must be equipped. In Ephesians, chapter 6, Paul challenges Christians to put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, we may be able to stand firm. After listing several pieces of our armor, Paul concludes with an over-arching battle tactic: “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions *with all kinds of prayers and requests*. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18, emphasis added). Likewise in 1 Timothy 2:1, Paul encourages the church to have many kinds of prayers as part of their public worship. He urges believers that prayers of all kinds should be made. Our intentional God designed variety in prayer, with each kind of prayer contributing uniquely to this powerful experience through which God chooses to work.

Prayer can take many forms to meet every occasion of the soul. Each type of prayer is like a weapon in our spiritual arsenal. Knowing when to utilize a particular kind of prayer can help us to pray more effectively. Scripture

gives a plethora of ways in which we can relate to our Father. The following reflection on “the Lord’s Prayer” (Jesus’ model prayer in Matthew 6:9–13) reveals a sampling of the means by which a believer becomes “armed and dangerous.”

Lesson Objective

Summarize five expressions of prayer.

What are five different expressions of prayer shown in the Lord’s prayer? Explain each one.

Praise and Adoration

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (v. 9)

Jesus begins His prayer by praising the Father—immediately putting the spotlight in the right place. Through adoration and praise, the Holy Spirit helps shift our focus away from ourselves and on to God, where it belongs. According to Ephesians, God redeemed us so that we might live “for the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:12). A life dedicated to praising God is our ultimate purpose. “As we spend time reflecting on His greatness, we build a foothold for our faith. Against the backdrop of His majesty, life takes on its proper perspective” (Dean 1993, 89). When we have spent time praising God for who He is, our agenda changes. Those burning issues we were eager to bring to God’s attention may seem less crucial. Furthermore, our desperation subsides as we focus on God’s greatness. Praise lifts our eyes above the futility of this life. It turns our attention away from our earthly concerns to the indescribable greatness of God. Praise sets the tone for our meeting with God and prepares us to listen to Him.

Some Christians are guilty of being *praise-misers*. For a variety of reasons, they withhold expressions of praise to God. Maybe they were raised in a family in which praise was doled out in carefully measured quantities; maybe it was not given out at all. Maybe they are not comfortable praising God because they are not confident they know the right words to say. Sometimes, it truly is a sacrifice to praise. My husband

and I have been married for over twenty years. I can honestly say that I never tire of hearing him say, “I love you.” While he may try to find creative expressions for his love, in the end, it is not fancy words that move me. I respond, “You had me at I love you.” So it is with praising God. We do not have to worry about coming up with fancy sounding words, and feel pressure to be creative in finding new ways to express our love to Him. “The Lord is more concerned with the integrity of our hearts than with the artfulness of our words” (Roberts 2005, 134). When we truly encounter God, praise will spontaneously flow from our hearts and lips. The more we experience God, the more we praise Him.

Do you praise God each day? Many Christians reserve praise for times of corporate worship. Their private devotions consist mainly of asking, perhaps with a touch of thanksgiving or confession. While praise should be a central component of congregational worship, it should also be a daily expression we give to God. If you are struggling to praise God, try focusing on the One who deserves your praise. Reflect on the nature of God, and what He has done for you through Jesus Christ. Determine to bless the Lord because He has done wondrous works, and mighty deeds. “Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits” (Psalm 103:1–2).

Intercessory Prayer

“Your kingdom come, your will be done” (v. 10)

What can a Christian do to become a more effective intercessor?

A vivid childhood memory has had a powerful impact on my life. It is the picture of my mother, on her knees in the early hours of the morning, interceding with God on behalf of her children. It challenged me to know that my mom was lifting up our names to God, seeking His will to be accomplished in our lives, and it was powerful to see God’s hand move in response to her prayers. Her example instilled in me the importance of intercessory prayer, or simply praying for the needs of others (see 1 Timothy 2:1–2; Colossians 1:9–12; 4:12–14; Acts 12:12; Luke 22:41–44).

Christians are instructed to pray in the Spirit at all times, making intercession for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18). Sometimes, we approach intercession as if it is our responsibility to get the attention of a very busy God, and we behave as if the outcome depends on us. We feel we must persist in prayer until He finally gives in and bends to our will. In their helpful work, *Disciplines of the Holy Spirit*, authors Tan and Gregg suggest a more accurate understanding of intercession is of waiting before God, developing quietness in the heart, and listening for His still, small voice, so that God can tap us on the shoulder and get our attention. He invites us to partner with Him in the things He is doing. So fundamentally, intercession is aligning ourselves—our prayers—with God’s will and purpose. Jesus is our model intercessor, aligning himself perfectly with the Father in prayer (Tan and Gregg 1997, 69–71). In John 5:30, Jesus said: “I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” We can do this because “The Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:27).

What can we do to be more open to the Holy Spirit’s leading in intercessory prayer? Tan and Gregg suggest three things that will help. First, we must cultivate intimacy with Jesus. The Holy Spirit flows through relationships, not methods; through people, not programs. Second, we must develop a listening heart, so we will become aware of what God is purposing. Since the beginning point of intercession is always, “Your will be done,” it requires as much listening as talking. Third, we must respond to the Spirit’s initiative and invitation. In the midst of our busyness, it is easy to resist His promptings. As we remain intimate with Jesus, however, and develop a listening heart, we will more often be able to say *yes*, and enter obediently into partnership with the Spirit.

Prayer of Petition

“Give us today our daily bread” (v. 11)

Petition refers to bringing our requests before God. A great amount of Christian prayer falls into this category. We act like college kids who phone home—collect—only when their money runs low. Yet, interestingly, the Bible does not discourage us from presenting our needs to God, and Jesus included petition in His model prayer. “In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). Almost half of the biblical psalms are attributed to David, and these

are filled with requests—for help, protection, deliverance, and healing. You cannot read the psalms without marveling at the freedom of the psalmists to ask again and again for what they need.

Why does God have us bring our requests before Him? Pastor and author Dr. Mark Roberts suggests several possible reasons. First, to remind us how much we need His help. If God automatically did what we wanted without us asking, we would figure that the world simply works perfectly and that God is neither active nor necessary. Supplication helps us recognize our need for God and marvel at His power when He answers prayer. Second, supplication allows us to participate in God's work in the world. He placed us in His world to take care of it and to work within it. Prayer is an essential aspect of our stewardship and labor. Finally, God wants us to pray because He wants *us*. Not only does He want to bless us with answers, but He blesses us with His presence, and we bless Him with our presence (Roberts 2005, 31).

Prayer of Confession

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive” (v. 12)

When I was a child, I feared that the Second Coming would occur while I had some unconfessed sin in my heart. Consequently, I often repeated, “God, forgive me for all of my sins, anything I may have ever done, forgive it now. Amen.” Have you ever done this—lump all your sins together into a big pile without so much as looking at them, and asking God to cover the whole lot? In one sense, this is a cop-out, a misunderstanding of the nature of repentance and forgiveness. I do not pause to examine my heart and deal with specific issues that God may want to change in my life. Instead, when I take those sins out of the pile one by one and call them by name, it allows me the opportunity to choose to turn away from that sin.

Our holy God requires holiness in His people. Sin puts a wall between us and God. The wall must be torn down if we are to once again experience intimacy with God. Because God requires a pure heart, an important element of prayer is bringing before God all of the things that do not bring glory to Him. We must pray with David, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). Paradoxically, if God is to cover our sin, we need to uncover it. Our natural tendency may be to

want to cover, or hide, our sin. We may be okay with confessing sins that seem fairly innocuous, but we tend to avoid confessing the sins that cause the most shame, the sins that have the greatest power to drag us down. Of course, by failing to admit them to the Lord, we allow these sins to retain their power over us. Anyone who has ever struggled with an addiction knows that a secret revealed loses its power. Paradoxically, if God is to cover our sin, we need to uncover it.

What is the purpose of conviction?

In addition to confessing those things of which we are aware, we should also allow time for God to search our hearts, examining our motives and our actions. Letting God convict us can prevent us from masking the sin by addressing only a symptom. We may repent of an action, when it is an underlying attitude that needs to be dealt with. We must allow Him to shine His light into the dark recesses of our lives: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24). Keep in mind the Holy Spirit’s conviction is different from the enemy’s condemnation. Conviction is meant to lift us out of our wrongdoing and deliver us to a new life free from sin. Condemnation, on the other hand, presses us down and puts us under a burden of guilt and shame. Scripture confirms: “God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). This is not saying that conviction should always make us feel comfortable—it should prod us to a higher level. But it should also give us the motivating desire to do what is right.

As we confess to God, we can rest assured that we will receive forgiveness. “Wash me and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7). Likewise, 1 John 1:9 promises, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgression from us” (Psalm 103:12).

Notice that Jesus' prayer asks God to forgive us our wrongs as we forgive those who have wronged us. This is an important principle of forgiveness: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14–15; see also 18:21–35). If we are walking in the light, we will have fellowship with one another, and this involves a consistent display of mercy and forgiveness toward fellow believers (1 John 1:7). Forgiveness is not condoning the wrongdoing, nor does it mean that all of the feelings and pain will go away. Rather, "Forgiveness is surrendering your right to hurt them back" (Hart 1993). It is a choice—a daily commitment—to give up your right to lash back. Forgiveness is choosing not to continue to be bitter toward the other person. Granted, some wounds are so deep they have left scars for which "God will walk us through an ongoing process toward complete healing of the pain. He will not withhold himself because we have not reached the conclusion of that process" (Dean 1993, 92).

Confession will always accompany a genuine hunger for God. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and unbelief and leads us into a prayer of confession and repentance (John 16:8–9). The Spirit works through our confession to produce a fruitful, holy, and Christ-like life—the only way to a life beyond regrets.

Spiritual Warfare

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (v. 13)

When we commit our lives to Christ, we enter the arena of spiritual warfare. Ephesians 6:12 confirms that believers are in a battle. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

My husband and I run a Bible school in Singapore, a country that has a large Hindu population. The Hindus place a dot on their forehead, signifying a third eye, or spiritual eye, which sees into the spirit realm. Furthermore, when we teach in Africa, our students are keenly aware of the spiritual realm, it is a reality of daily life. Yet in Western culture, we often are oblivious to the spiritual realm. A word of warning: we dare not

underestimate the power of darkness. Peter did that and ended up denying Christ. Satan's tactics are wily schemes. He lies and distorts the truth. He is depicted as a master of disguises, presenting himself as an angel of light. To counter his schemes, we must be well acquainted with the truth.

While we cannot underestimate the power of darkness, we dare not despair. "Our Lord does not want us to adopt a hunker-down-in-the-bunker mentality. The church of Jesus Christ is on the march, not under siege, no matter how His people may sometimes act" (Fryar 1998, 57). Our Commander promised that "on this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18).

Because our battle is spiritual, it must be fought in God's strength. Fortunately, God has prepared us for battle through Christ. Every piece of armor described by Paul in Ephesians 6:13–18 is Christ. He is truth. He is righteousness. He is the gospel of peace. He is the source of our faith. He is our salvation. He is the Word of God. We are fully protected and armed through Jesus Christ. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). We do not require any piece of armor or weapon outside of Him (Dean 1993, 94).

When we enter the battle, we find Satan and his forces defenseless against us. Satan's forces are already defeated; he and they were defeated at the Cross! "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). Prayer is one of our most effective weapons in spiritual warfare. Think of our Spirit-directed prayers as smart bombs landing directly on enemy strongholds. Our persevering prayers are systematically and precisely destroying Satan's hold. Against seemingly all odds, victory is won. Thus, spiritual warfare is radical; it goes deep beneath the surface to uproot evil and upset the status quo. "Those who know this are the true subversives, guerrillas of the Spirit, moving kingdoms and creation from their knees" (Patterson 2001, 22).

The Richness and Diversity of Prayer

Jesus' prayer reveals the richness and diversity of prayer. Our intentional God designed variety in prayer, with each kind of prayer contributing uniquely to this powerful experience. This list is by no means exhaustive.

Scripture reveals numerous additional kinds of prayers, including the prayer of thanksgiving, prayer for healing, contemplative (silent) prayer, corporate prayer, and praying in the Spirit. (Several of these are discussed in other chapters throughout this book.) As we become aware of the variety in prayer, we can step into new avenues of prayer. In the words of pioneer missionary Frank Laubach, there are “undiscovered continents of spiritual living.”

I have always been of the opinion that the world looks better in color. Diversity is a good thing. Take, for example, the simple experience of eating. My husband and I spent a summer in Uganda, Africa. During that time, we ate either rice and beans, or cassava and rice, every night (with only four exceptions). I must admit, by the time we returned home I was really hungry for something other than rice and beans. If I had to eat that food all the time, I would tire of it in a hurry because I have grown accustomed to enjoying a variety of foods. Indian, Italian, Mexican, Chinese, Thai, Scandinavian, as well as American, are all foods that could be on our family’s table on any given night of the week. Variety makes life much more interesting.

In the same way, it is possible for us to get stuck in a prayer rut. Often we will be strong in a few areas, and neglect others. But prayer is more exciting—and more effective—when we cultivate variety. Our prayers should incorporate all the elements of confession, intercession, praise and adoration, supplication, spiritual warfare, and thanksgiving. Discovering the rich diversity of prayer will not only broaden and deepen our relational experience with God, but it will also help us accomplish His will on earth. Become armed and dangerous—guerrillas of the Spirit, and expect your powerful God to do the extraordinary!

Chapter 4: Daring Dialogue: The Reciprocity of Prayer

Most of us have experienced times when we felt as if our prayers were not wafting above our ceilings. We have become so accustomed to electronic devices that automatically put us on hold or redirect our calls, that our finite minds could muse that getting through to God is similar to plugging into a cosmic switchboard. Some calls get through. Some do not. Of course,

the Bible teaches nothing like this. We know that nothing or no one screens our prayers. God takes all His own calls: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you” (Psalm 50:15). He wants to hear from His children—He delights in our prayers (Proverbs 15:8). Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ need no device, gimmick, or inside track to speak with the Creator of the Universe! Jesus’ work on the Cross provides us free, unlimited access to the Father.

Then why does it sometimes seem difficult to hear His voice? And why, at times, does He seem silent? These are questions that deserve study. This chapter will examine the process of experiencing meaningful communication with God, including the ways in which God speaks today, and what we can do to increase our ability to hear His voice.

Lesson 4.1 Prayer as Two-Way Communication

Objectives

4.1.1 Relate how it makes you feel to know the Creator of the universe desires to commune with you.

4.1.2 Summarize three developmental stages of prayer.

Lesson 4.2 His Sheep Hear His Voice

Objectives

4.2.1 Tell how God still speaks to people today.

4.2.2 Identify five prerequisites for hearing God’s voice.

4.2.3 Point out five avenues God uses to speak to His people.

4.2.4 Identify five cautions that must be exercised when considering supernatural revelation.

4.2.5 List seven tests that can determine if God is the source of a leading.

Lesson 4.1 Prayer as Two-Way Communication

It is an honor to speak with God. We do not have to go through a priest, or a saint, or any other intermediary. We do not have to follow any prescribed rituals. We do not have to wait for an appointment. Anytime, anywhere,

under any circumstances, we can “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16) and enjoy direct access with the King of Kings. While such an incredible opportunity awaits, sadly, many Christians only think of prayer as talking to God, rarely stopping to wonder whether God might want to respond.

Lesson Objective

Relate how it makes you feel to know the Creator of the universe desires to commune with you.

The Creator of the Universe Wants to Talk to Me?

You may be thinking, *Why would the Creator of the universe want to talk to me? Why would the Maker of heaven and earth pause on His throne to listen and respond to the feeble prayers of one insignificant human?* Because He loves us that much! Because He is a Father who loves to talk with His children.

In both the Old and New Testaments, God spoke to His people often. He spoke to kings, judges, prophets, shepherds, and disciples. He spoke to old and young alike. He spoke to those in powerful positions and to those with no social status. He spoke to the righteous and the sinner. Throughout the ages, God has continued to speak to His people. If you have accepted Christ as your Savior and Lord, that includes you! He speaks direction, comfort, insight, correction, exhortation, and promises to His people today. “Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying” (Revelation 2:7, NLT). Prayer is amazing! Through prayer, we are able to communicate with God, himself. When we pray, the Divine Creator of the universe listens as we present the deepest cries of our hearts to Him. He listens because He longs for a growing, intimate relationship with us.

Imagine! God Almighty wants a relationship with us! Instead of thinking, *Why do I have to pray?*, we should feel honored and humbled that God in heaven wants to talk to us. God is truly interested in what we have to say to Him. He is never too busy for us. Isaiah 65:24 reads, “Before they call, I will

answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.” If you called the President of the United States, you would not get through. Or if you called your favorite celebrity, he or she may not have time for you. Sometimes, even our friends are not interested in what we have to say. But the Creator of the universe, our Heavenly Father, is always ready to listen and respond.

Lesson Objective

Summarize three developmental stages of prayer.

Deepening Your Communication with God

President Franklin Roosevelt was weary of the mindless small talk of the White House receptions. Wondering if anyone was engaging in any real conversation, he conducted an experiment at a White House gathering. As he shook a hand and flashed that big smile he would say, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.” With but one exception, the people would smile back and say something like, “How lovely,” or “You are doing a great job.” The exception was a foreign diplomat who responded quietly, “I am sure she had it coming to her” (Patterson 2001, 128–129). How many of our prayers are more like White House reception small talk? If this has been the case, we can be certain that our Lord desires a deeper level of communication.

The proposition of having a relationship with God is quite exciting. The key to any relationship—whether it is with a friend, spouse, or family member—is communication. Communication is just as important in our relationship with God. As our relationship grows, the communication, too, should undergo a transformation process.

What are the three developmental stages of prayer?

Dr. Douglas Rumford, author of *Soul Shaping*, proposes that most people move through developmental stages of prayer (Rumford 1996, 164–179). The word *stages* is not meant to imply a false ranking of novice and advanced intercessor. Rather it simply refers to a progressive maturity that

develops in our partnership with God. While the process is not the same for everyone, there are three general stages of prayer that apply to all of us.

Stage 1: Monologue

First, as new believers, we think of prayer as *talking to God*, with the emphasis on *to*. This first stage is known as *monologue*. Prayer at this level is a one-sided conversation, kind of like writing a letter to your governor or e-mailing the White House. We inform God of our needs or the needs of others. We may take a few moments to thank or praise Him, but the content of the prayer is request-driven. The prayer is primarily one directional.

Stage 2: Dialogue

At some point, our prayer moves beyond being request-driven as we develop a more complete repertoire of communication with God. We discover that there are a number of elements to prayer in addition to petition. A deeper level of prayer can be enjoyed when we realize that prayer is meant to be a dialogue, a two-way exchange of thoughts and ideas, and actual conversation with the living God. Now, rather than approaching prayer as an exercise, it is a relational conversation with our Heavenly Father who loves us, wants to hear from us, and has much to say to us. As we apply ourselves to listening for His side of the conversation, it should not be uncommon to hear Him say something. As our hearts cry out to Him, and we long for His touch, we should expect God's personal communication.

Stage 3: Unceasing Prayer

The third stage is *unceasing* prayer. This involves an ongoing dialogue as we practice His presence throughout the day. We can develop a habit of ongoing prayer that moves us closer to the ideal: Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It involves taking advantage of the inner dialogue that is always running through our minds. We usually speak aloud at the rate of 150 to 200 words per minute. But what we may not realize is that we constantly talk privately to ourselves at the rate of approximately 1,300

words per minute. This self-talk shapes our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Have you ever had a song running through your mind and you just cannot get it out of your head? This is an example of the human capacity of self-talk, of an active mind that is in continual motion. It is all part of the process Jesus described when He said, “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34–35). As we grow in prayer, we will enjoy hearing His voice.

Lesson 4.2 His Sheep Hear His Voice

“Why is it, when we talk to God, we call it prayer, but when God talks to us, we call it schizophrenia?” (quoted in Warren 2001, 1). This quip by Lily Tomlin captures how much of our society feels about the concept of God speaking to us today. Even among some Christians, anyone who actually “hears” from God is often viewed suspiciously. Joan of Arc, the seventeen-year-old French girl who led her country to victory in battle in the fifteenth century, was burned at the stake for claiming God spoke to her. Many Christians want God to speak to them, but few actually experience it on a regular basis. Why is this so, and is it possible to learn to hear His voice?

Lesson Objective

Tell how God still speaks to people today.

Why do people have trouble believing that God still speaks to people today?

Tuning In to Hear God’s Voice

God desires to speak to His children. Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27, NASB). The Shepherd is still speaking—are you listening for His voice?

Some Christians fear that if God speaks to people, this could be seen as a substitute for, or as an addition to, the Bible. And since the Bible is the final

and complete revelation of God, then any expectation of hearing from God other than through the Bible is inappropriate. Yet such thinking denies the clear teaching of the Word, which reveals numerous ways by which God speaks to people. We will discuss these later.

Other Christians are reluctant to open themselves to God's leadings because they have seen abuses in the lives of believers claiming to hear from God. Some use it as a means of shirking personal responsibility. "They have performed a kind of intellectual lobotomy on themselves, and they expect the Holy Spirit to choose their socks in the morning and their restaurant for dinner. They claim to experience a leading an hour, a vision a day, a miracle a week.... What they try to pawn off as divine leading is really a very human form of irresponsibility" (Hybels 1998, 136–137). For others, God's "leading" was nothing short of human manipulation. "God told me to tell you this" or "God told me we are to do it this way" are merely ruses to ensure they get their way. Finally, some are well-intentioned, but are still in the learning process of distinguishing God's voice. A good friend of mine is a pastor's wife at a large church. After fifteen years of marriage, she has not been able to have children. Someone once prophesied over her, claiming that she would have a baby within a year. That was over five years ago.

In reaction to obvious abuses of the Holy Spirit's ministry, some Christians run in the opposite direction when it comes to listening for God's voice. They feel that the Holy Spirit's promptings go against human nature and conventional thought patterns. Accustomed to making logical, well-reasoned choices, they are uncomfortable about letting the Holy Spirit begin His supernatural ministry in their lives. Unfortunately, people who cut themselves off from God's direction find their religious experience becoming cerebral, predictable and, often, past tense.

Lesson Objective

Identify five prerequisites for hearing God's voice.

Even for Christians who recognize that God still speaks today, there is a lot of confusion. If God still speaks, then why does He seem silent much of the time? And when I think He is speaking, how do I know it is really Him,

and not my overactive imagination? The following section seeks to shed light on how we can learn to hear the voice of God.

Prerequisites for Hearing God's Voice

God can speak to anyone He wants, any time He wants, through whatever means He wants, whether the person is listening for His voice or not. (Remember, in Numbers 22:20–28, God chose to speak to the prophet Balaam through his donkey!) However, Scripture does reveal several principles that can assist us in being prepared to hear His voice. Here are five basic prerequisites that are commonly found in people who hear God's voice on a regular basis.

1. We Must Recognize the Importance of Seeking God's Voice

What are five requirements for hearing God's voice and why are they important?

If we want to hear God's voice, we must be convinced of the importance of seeking it. Those who listen to God's voice understand that this is how God designed the Christian life to be lived. Romans 8:14 declares "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." Our spiritual and personal growth depends on receiving and responding to His leadings. Only when we hear God's voice, and follow His leading, can we remain in the center of His will, experiencing all that He has for us. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). The Holy Spirit desires to lead and guide you. He knows the path that will glorify the Father and be productive for you, and He wants to put you on it, but if you are not listening to Him, you will not know where He is going. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit "will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13), but He can only do that as you are sensitive to His prompting and leading.

2. We Must Commit to Obeying God's Voice

If we want to hear God's voice, we must be committed to obeying it. How can you expect God to give you more information, if you are not even acting on what He has already revealed in the Word? We must be living according

to God's commands to learn His will. Sometimes we can feel distant from God because of something we have done. Sin in our lives can have a powerful disconnecting effect that causes us not to hear God's voice. We must individually repent of sin in our lives to clear the channels between us and God. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:1–2). We must realize that the only "good move" is "God's move." "The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3–4).

Jesus exhorts, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9). The Greek verb *akouo* refers to more than the ability to hear audible sound and understand its meaning. It is clear that "hearing" has everything to do with the attitude of the Christian disciple. "Hearing" has to do with a person's willingness to be changed by what he or she hears (Hayford 2001, 30–31). If we do not follow through on the Holy Spirit's leadings, He may see no reason to continue speaking.

3. We Must Stop Long Enough to Hear God's Voice

A primary reason many Christians do not hear God's voice is that they do not stop long enough to let Him get a word in. Our culture operates at such a fast pace; we go to work early and stay late. We take work home and make phone calls while we drive. We check our e-mail from our palm pilots as we watch the news and eat our dinner. The pace never lets up, and while there is never a dull moment, there is seldom a reflective moment either. Where does the still, small voice of God fit into our hectic lives? When do we allow Him to lead and correct and affirm? And if this never happens, how can we be led by the Spirit? We must schedule times of stillness that make communication possible.

The story is told about an old man who had become concerned about his wife's hearing. He was convinced that she could not hear, but he could not get her to admit she had a problem and see a doctor. One day he decided to prove his point. He entered their living room where his wife was seated, facing the fireplace. From behind her he said in a clear voice, "Honey, I love

you. Did you hear that?” No response. He walked halfway across the room and repeated, “Honey, I said I love you. Do you hear me?” Nothing. Finally he walked over, stood in front of her, and shouted, “I love you. Can you hear me now?” She looked up from her knitting and replied, “Yes dear, and for the third time, I love you too” (Moon 2004, 84).

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Any parent knows about ears that do not hear. “But I did not hear you,” a child protests, after clear instructions. A revealing comparison—for we often fail to “hear” God’s clear commands (Yancey 2006, 187). Listening is an important part of hearing. We need to develop a lifestyle that allows opportunities to slow down and listen to His voice so we can lead an authentic Christian life. Most of us have to be intentional about stopping long enough, and quieting ourselves, to be in a position that we can hear His voice. We must turn everything else off; tune it out. If there are distracting thoughts, jot them down and forget about them. May we say, like the young Samuel, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9).

4. We Must Learn to Recognize God’s Voice

Sometimes when God speaks, we may not recognize it as God because we are not accustomed to hearing His voice. If we want to hear God’s voice, we must learn to recognize the sound of it. Jesus said, “My sheep know my voice” (John 10:27). We must spend enough time with the Shepherd that we know His voice when we hear it. Some people only come to God when they are in trouble and need help. But if they are not used to hearing from God, they will find it difficult to recognize His voice when they really need Him. Jesus knew that the practice of solitude sharpens our awareness of God’s presence and helps us learn to discern God’s voice. Jesus often retreated from people to better discern the will of His Father (Matthew 4:1–11; 14:14, 23; 17:1–9; 26:36–46; Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12).

We learn to recognize His voice as we actively listen for it. The following story illustrates this point well. A zoologist was walking down a busy city street with a friend. In the midst of the honking horns and screeching tires, he exclaimed to his friend, “Listen to that cricket!” The friend looked at the zoologist in astonishment and asked, “You hear a cricket in the middle of all this noise and confusion?” Without a word, the zoologist reached into his

pocket, took out a coin, and flipped it into the air. As it clinked on the sidewalk, a dozen heads turned in response. The zoologist said quietly to his friend, “We hear what we listen for.”

What are you listening for? Are you able to discern God’s voice in the midst of life’s noise? We must be listening for, and able to recognize His voice if we want His guidance.

5. We Must Anticipate Hearing God’s Voice

If we want to hear God’s voice, we must expect that He will speak to us. We need to work on the sensitizing of our hearing—having ears to hear. Become intentional in listening for God. Ask God, “Lord, if you could say anything to me right now, what would you say?” Have a journal open, and be ready to write the ideas that come to mind. When He speaks, make note of what God has said, and look for ways to apply what you have heard. Write what you sense you have heard (a word, phrase, passage of Scripture, and so forth) and carry it with you throughout the day. We really do forget most things unless we record or apply them in some way.

If you do not hear anything, relax and enjoy the stillness. Be assured that God is present. During these times we can learn to be content with His presence, with or without any specific message or insight.

Lesson Objective

Point out five avenues God uses to speak to His people.

Five Avenues God Uses to Speak to Us

God has been speaking to people from the beginning of human history, both directly and indirectly. Often I have wished that God would give me the “writing on the wall” as He did with King Belshazzar (Daniel 5) or a “burning bush” experience like Moses had (Exodus 3). But more often than not, He speaks in more natural ways. So, how does God speak to us? Hearing the voice of God is not as difficult as many might think. Scripture

reveals a variety of means through which God chooses to communicate with His people today.

What are five ways God speaks to people?

1. God Speaks through the Word

The primary way we hear God speak to us is through the Bible, His written revelation to humanity. Scripture is identified as the written Word (*logos*) of God.

The Bible is a living Word that has not been given to us solely for information, analysis, and education. God uses the Word to teach and correct, to lead and direct, and to keep and protect. As we read the Word, God often speaks with thoughts we sense are His. The Holy Spirit ignites what we are reading from the pages of the Bible. (Hayford 2001, 24–28)

Scripture reveals principles that are the foundation for living a life pleasing to God. For example, say a young man is wondering if he should date that girl at work. As he reads the Word, the Holy Spirit helps him understand that believers are not to be unequally yoked. So, as we read the Word, the Holy Spirit breathes truth into our hearts in order to transform our lives.

How can we enhance our ability to hear God's still, small voice?

Anyone who wants to regularly hear God's voice must be a student of the Word. If we think we can hear clearly from God without spending time in the Word, we are mistaken. Listening for God's voice without spending time in the Word on a regular basis is irresponsible and even dangerous for it opens us up to hearing voices that are not from God. People who want to be led by the Spirit, but who are too busy or lazy to spend time in the Word and in prayer, set themselves up for easy deception (Meyer 2003, 40).

2. God Speaks through a Still, Small Voice

When my son, Joshua was six, there was a boy at school who often bullied others. Joshua found it hard to be nice to him. One day I gave him a fish symbol necklace and tucked it inside his shirt. “Every time you feel that fish,” I said, “let it remind you of the love of Jesus. Pretend it is whispering, ‘Be kind to others.’ ” Joshua quickly responded, “I do not need a necklace; I hear that in my heart.”

Inner promptings

God often speaks quietly, with gentle whispers in our hearts and minds. As He speaks we sense an inner check or urging within our spirits, a prompting that comes as divinely given intuition, insight, instruction or warning (1 Kings 11:12; Isaiah 30:21; Acts 10:9–12; Ephesians 1:17–23). Memories, a verse from the Bible, or images of friends in need may drift into our minds unsolicited. If God is leading us by an inner prompting, that nudge will become stronger until it is obeyed. However, if we wait too long to respond, God may have to move on to someone else in order to get His will accomplished (Meyer 2003, 86).

George Muller, a nineteenth-century English pastor, was convicted by the Spirit of the importance of listening to God. As he determined to listen and wait upon the Lord for direction, God guided and directed him in amazing ways. Muller began to live and minister completely through the contributions of people prompted by the Holy Spirit in answer to his prayer. By the time of his death, George Muller had been used by God to build orphanages that provided for over ten thousand children, and he had distributed over eight million dollars that had been given to him. Muller was only able to accomplish these things because of people’s sensitivity and faithfulness to the inner prompting of the Spirit.

Moral conscience

One aspect of this “still, small voice” involves our conscience. God speaks through the moral sense within each person, so that a fundamental sense of right and wrong is innately present (Romans 2:14–15; 9:1). The Holy Spirit enlightens our awareness of what we are doing that leads to death and what we need to do to enjoy the abundant life. The Holy Spirit speaks to our

conscience to convict us of sin and convince us of righteousness (John 16:7–11). (Remember, as we discussed in Chapter 3, conviction is entirely different from condemnation.)

God gives—or takes—peace from our conscience to let us know whether we are on track. When the Holy Spirit nudges us to do right, we must obey. If we ignore this natural sense of right and wrong, we can become hardened. The more hard-hearted we become, the more difficult it is to hear from God, for we have become de-sensitized to God’s still small voice.

God’s ability to whisper to us in His still small voice can be enhanced by two things. First, those inward promptings are greatly affected by knowledge of the standards and guidelines that God has established for us in His Word. The more we meditate on and saturate ourselves in the Word, the more readily He will bring it to mind in times of need. Second, the more time we spend in the presence of God, the more sensitive we become to our own attitudes and actions that do not reflect God’s heart.

3. Sometimes God Speaks through Natural Means

What are some of the natural means through which God speaks?

God can use a variety of natural means to speak to us. These means could include people, circumstances, experiences, and natural creation, to name a few.

People

Sometimes God chooses to speak to us through other people, often by using significant godly others to mentor us. This can happen not only in the preaching and teaching we receive, but also in conversations. Scripture reminds us that there is wisdom in godly counsel: “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed ... how good is a timely word” (Proverbs 15:22–23). When the Lord uses someone to speak His words to us, they impact us in a deep and profound way—like someone turning on the lights in the midst of darkness. A right word spoken at the right time is a good thing. While we should always discipline ourselves to go to God first (not basing our lives on what others say), we recognize that He may use the counsel of other believers to clarify things, or to give us confirmation that we are truly hearing from Him (Meyer 2003, 68).

Creation

Sometimes God chooses to speak through His natural creation. Scripture declares that He speaks through creation's artistry and majesty with such clarity that all humankind is held accountable to believe in the Creator (Psalm 19:1–6; Romans 1:20). In God's compassion for humanity, He did not hide the truth of His existence from anyone, but reveals himself to all people through the things He has made (His handiworks). Nature itself testifies of God's power. Furthermore, God used a rainbow as a sign of His covenant with Noah. He used dew on a fleece to help guide Gideon. He caused a fig tree that did not bear fruit to wither and die as a lesson to the disciples. He calmed the storm, demonstrating His power over the wind and the waves. He caused darkness to cover the earth as Christ died on the Cross. If we intentionally pause and look around us, we may be surprised to find that God is still speaking through His creation.

Circumstances

God can also choose to speak to us through a variety of life circumstances, including experiences, relationships, education, finances, and so forth. God can open and close doors by arranging physical circumstances as necessary. For example, sometimes God guides through finances by supernaturally bringing in the finances (or withholding them). When considering God's leading through circumstances, we must remember that circumstances can be misinterpreted. Difficult circumstances (opposition) may not necessarily be a sign that we are out of God's will. Just because we encounter problems does not demand that God is closing a door. Re-read the book of Acts and reflect on the lives of the apostles. They were stoned, beaten, imprisoned, and driven out of town, yet they were doing exactly what God had called them to do. Sometimes, opposition is one of the greatest signs that the message is from God. The good news is that if God is opening a door, no person can shut it (1 Corinthians 16:9).

Spiritual experiences

God may speak to you through a very specific incident, or spiritual experience. Sometimes this happens in prayer at home. Sometimes this happens when we respond to an altar call. Often this will occur as people respond to God's call for salvation. Personally, I had a significant experience when God called me into full-time ministry while I was on a missions trip in Haiti. When God speaks to us through a specific experience, we are able to point back to that moment in time as a benchmark for a shifting in our lives.

God uses natural things to reveal himself to us

Many Christians assume that hearing from God will always be *spiritual*, but it is clear from these examples that God uses natural things, as well as spiritual, to reveal himself to us. Begin listening and watching for God to speak or show himself strongly everywhere (2 Chronicles 16:9).

4. Sometimes God Speaks through Supernatural Means

What are some of the supernatural means through which God speaks?

Sometimes God chooses to speak to us through what could be termed *supernatural* revelation. Throughout Scripture, we read accounts where God spoke through signs and wonders, as well as prophetic promptings by the Holy Spirit. These means are powerful signs, convincing hearts of God's power and presence (2 Kings 2:15; Acts 13:12; 1 Corinthians 14:5, 22–26).

Gifts of the Spirit

A primary avenue of supernatural revelation includes the gifts of the Spirit. Sometimes the Lord speaks His message into our lives through prophecy, interpretation of tongues, a word of wisdom, and so forth. "In those days, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Joel 2:28). When God speaks through prophetic words it draws our attention to a larger, clearer understanding of His will as revealed in His eternal Word. A prophetic word inspired by God will strengthen, encourage, and comfort the one(s) who receive it (1 Corinthians

14:3). Such leadings must always be in line with the Word of God, and a personal word of prophecy should confirm something that is already in your heart.

Dreams and visions

Supernatural revelation can also include dreams and visions. Again, Joel 2:28 says, “Afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people ... your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.” Throughout Scripture there are many accounts of God speaking to people through dreams and visions.

In Joseph’s boyhood, God spoke to him in dreams, and Joseph interpreted dreams for Pharaoh and Pharaoh’s servants (Genesis 40–41). Later, in the New Testament, God used two dreams to guide Joseph, the father of Jesus, warning him to flee to Egypt in order to escape Herod (Matthew 1:20; 2:12–13). God still speaks through dreams today.

One of my former students is now a missionary in a closed country. He regularly serves under threat of arrest, imprisonment, and even death. Consistently, God leads him through dreams. For instance, he has had dreams telling him to immediately leave various cities. He obeys such dreams, and the next morning officials have stormed the homes where he had been staying. Thankfully, this missionary listened to the dreams, for God has used this means to spare his life and ministry. If you awake from a dream that seems unusually vivid and real, ask the Lord if He is speaking to you through that dream.

Visions differ from dreams in that visions occur while we are awake. God stopped Paul on the road to Damascus. Through a vision God informed Paul that Ananias would come and pray for his sight; God used another vision to instruct Ananias in how to respond to Paul (Acts 9:1–12). God continued to use visions to guide Paul in his ministry (Acts 16:9–10). Peter’s vision of the sheet of animals was the method God used to teach Peter about clean and unclean foods (Acts 10:9–23).

Angels

When God speaks through dreams and visions in the biblical accounts, they often include the appearance of an angel as a messenger or as a helper in a time of need. In both of the dreams given to Joseph (Mary's husband), an angel of the Lord appeared to him (Matthew 1:20; 2:13). An angel appeared to Zechariah in a vision, informing him that Elizabeth would bear a son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:11). An angel comforted Paul in his imprisonment and shared God's direction (Acts 27:23–24). Throughout the Bible, God sent angels as His messengers to speak to His people. This method of communication is still one He uses from time-to-time, and one that we cannot discount.

Lesson Objective

Identify five cautions that must be exercised when considering supernatural revelation.

Caution with supernatural revelation

When considering supernatural guidance, reflection on a few guidelines can spare us from making the mistake of attributing to God what is not from Him.

What are five rules to use when determining whether a supernatural revelation is from God?

a. Supernatural guidance must always line up with the Word. Supernatural messages always need to be evaluated in light of Scripture. Many are afraid of calling into question something that may not be of God. In reality, we should be more afraid of not calling into question something that is not of God. Prophetic words are not infallible, because people are not infallible. Sometimes human emotions and motives can become involved, and that is why we must evaluate these utterances.

b. Supernatural guidance will confirm what God is already telling you. Never do something simply because someone says, "The Lord told me to tell

you.” If the Lord has instructions for you, He will tell you, and the message will confirm what you already know by the Spirit. Years ago, a lady informed me that God had told her I was God’s choice for her son.

Obviously, one of us was not hearing from the Lord, and I decided that I would wait until God told me otherwise. I am so glad I did!

If a word does not bear agreement in your heart, do not worry about it. A lot of well-meaning people think they have heard from God for others, but they have not. Remember, operating in the spiritual gifts is a learning process. If someone prophesies something to you that is not already in your heart, write down the words that are spoken over you and just wait for the Lord to reveal to you whether or not the words are from Him. If a word is truly from God, He will bring it to pass in His time.

c. Supernatural guidance is not intended as a substitute for seeking God ourselves. Sadly, some Christians think they cannot hear from God themselves, so they spend all of their time trying to hear from God through other people, asking people if they have a word for them, or trying to get people to make difficult decisions for them. While it is always wonderful when God chooses to confirm His will for us through supernatural means, ultimately, each believer must take personal responsibility for his or her life. It is only when we are confident that we have heard from God (rather than from another person) that we will have the assurance to carry us through the difficult times. It is a great gift when God speaks to us supernaturally, but we must not wait for a supernatural word to obey God. We are to diligently read the Word and spend time in prayerful communion with the Father. As we do that, God will work His plan in and through us.

d. Extra caution should be used if we think we have heard something for someone else. The best approach, after careful examination of your motives, would be to tell the person that you have been praying for him or her and you are wondering if these ideas make any sense to this person. It is usually unwise (and sometimes arrogant) to say to another person, “The Lord told me to tell you ...” Offer what is on your mind as a loving suggestion, and then trust the person to work through it with the Lord (Rumford 1996, 171–173).

e. More caution should be used also when considering dreams, visions, and angels. While God does still speak through these means today, we

cannot assume that every dream is a spiritual dream. The dream could simply be a result of something that prevented us from falling into a deep, restful sleep. Likewise, not every vision may be God trying to send a message. Since not every dream or vision is spiritual, we must use discernment, wisdom, and balance, testing it to see if it is from God. Similarly, if someone reports having seen an angel, we should not assume this impossible simply because God has not led us in that way; neither should we try to make something happen ourselves just because some people have reported it happened to them. We must leave these things to God. As with all supernatural leading, we should seek the Giver, not the gift. God is faithful to lead us all, as the Spirit sees fit. In our lives and ministries, we would do well to “speak more about what *normally* happens to *most* people, rather than what *may* happen to a *few*” (Meyer 2003, 50).

5. Sometimes God Speaks by Giving Us a Desire to Do What He Wants Done

Sadly, some Christians seem to believe that if they really want to do something, then it cannot possibly be God’s will. Such a mentality does not reflect the character of God. The psalmist writes, “Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). This works two ways: Yes, He gives us what we long for, but He also puts a longing in our heart for things He wants us to have. As long as our hearts seek to do God’s will, our desires will fall in line with His. Our wills begin to coincide. “For it is God who works in you *to will* and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). When God leads us to do something, there is growing zeal in us to see it achieved.

As we grow in intimacy with God, we know His heart, His character, and His ways. Our spirit becomes filled with His Spirit, and our desires merge with His. Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). How can this be possible, unless there really is a merging of our desires with God’s as we mature in Him? Consequently, we can move about with some degree of freedom following our sanctified desires, as long as we are ready to go in another direction if God shows us a reason to do so (Meyer 2003, 89). How

do we know if something is a sanctified desire? It is consistent with Scripture; it glorifies God; and it will strengthen us or others.

Lesson Objective

List seven tests that can determine if God is the source of a leading.

Seven Tests to Determine If It Is Really God Speaking

First John 4:1 instructs us to “not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” Fortunately, there are several criteria to test spiritual leadings we receive. Thoughtful reflection on the following guidelines is helpful as we explore this dynamic of prayer.

1. It Will Line Up with the Word

Ask: Is this leading consistent with God’s character as revealed in His written Word?

What are seven questions we can ask to determine if God is really the One speaking to us?

The Bible is our litmus test for any revelation we sense we are receiving. If we think we have heard from God, we must check it against Scripture, for when God speaks to us, it will always be consistent with His character, as revealed in the Word. For example, if I went shopping and came home with an extra item in my bag that I did not pay for, and I thought God was telling me that it was His way of blessing me, I would know the voice was not God’s because He is always honest.

The Holy Spirit and the Word will always agree. The Spirit will not tell you to do something that is contradictory to the Word! One young woman announced she was going to marry her non-Christian boyfriend because the Holy Spirit had told her he was the one for her. She did not hear from God.

Nor did the pastor who ran off with his secretary, stating God had blessed their love and they “felt a real peace about it.” In each of these cases, they failed to test what they heard in God’s Word. If we think we have heard God, but what we are hearing contradicts the Bible in any way, we can be sure that it is not God’s voice we are hearing! Nothing that comes from God would contradict the principles contained in the authoritative teaching of Scripture.

We must not ascribe the same authority to what we hear as we ascribe to the Bible. When God speaks to us today, it is in no way the equivalent of the closed canon of the Scriptures. Therefore, all communication being declared in the name of the Lord is to be examined and evaluated in light of the Word. This is why it is so important to become students of the Word. In order for the Word to be our standard by which all else is judged, we must know the Word; that will help us to recognize the voice of error.

2. Godly Counsel Will Confirm It

Ask: Do my closest friends and spiritual mentors sense this leading to be from God?

If we believe we have heard some specific direction for our lives, we should seek confirmation and counsel from wise friends and spiritually mature counselors, such as pastors. We can trust that God will confirm His word through godly people in our lives—people who truly have our best interest at heart. This brings safety and stability. Luke writes that Paul began his missionary journey after the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” and after the brothers of the church of Antioch “placed their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:2,3).

Especially when it comes to major life decisions, it is wise to err on the side of caution, humbly asking others you know and trust what they feel about your sense of God’s direction. Hybels writes this caution:

If a leading creates unrest in the spirit of mature Christian friends or counselors as you share it with them, question it. If a leading requires you to shatter family relationships or important friendships, question it. If a leading requires you to go deeply in debt or place someone else in a

position of awkwardness, compromise, or danger, question it. I am not saying you should automatically reject such leadings (unless they are also against Scripture), but reconsider them and treat them very carefully. (Hybels 1998, 165)

There is wisdom in godly counsel.

3. You Will Have Peace about Doing It

Ask: Even if it may be tough, does my spirit tell me I am doing the right thing?

When we have heard from God, we will feel a peace knowing that we are taking the right action or making the right decision. “You will keep in perfect peace, him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you” (Isaiah 26:3). Peace is an internal confirmation that what we are doing is approved by God. It should be noted that it is possible to have peace, even in the face of problems, challenges, or fears. Paul and Silas had such peace that they could sing praises to God, even though they had been stripped, beaten, and thrown into a dark, cold prison cell (Acts 16:22–25). Despite the challenges we face, we can experience a deep, abiding peace that carries us through the storm.

If you question whether a leading is from God, figuratively place it on the scale with peace; do not proceed if peace cannot hold its weight against the guidance you have heard. You may simply have to say, “It is not wise for me to do this, because I do not have peace about it.” Even when you are confident God has spoken to you, you should wait until peace fills your soul to do what He has instructed you to do—this will ensure that the timing is right.

A word of caution should be noted. While God’s leading will have an emotional impact on our lives, we should remember that emotions are great servants, but terrible masters. Emotions serve us best as signals to what is going on beneath the surface. If we feel nothing but anger, anxiety, depression, fear, and deflated faith, these emotions could be warning signals. By contrast, we can typically associate the emotions of love, peace, and joy with a movement toward God, surrender to His kingdom, and the infilling presence of Jesus. Do you feel an increased sense of hope? Is your

faith increased? If you can answer *yes* to these kinds of questions, there is great likelihood the leading is of God.

4. It Calls Us to Service

Ask: Is this leading self-serving and self-promoting, or does it call me to serve others?

Many counterfeit leadings are fairly easy to discern, because they are self-promoting or self-serving.

One frustrated man said, “I have been an elder in my church for thirty years, and I have seen a lot of pastors come and go. I would like to know why every one of them has felt a ‘leading’ to leave this church when the invitation elsewhere involved more money, more benefits, a bigger staff and a larger house. No pastor has ever been led to a smaller church with a smaller salary and fewer benefits. (Hybels 1998, 163)

On the other hand, we can usually sense that a leading is from the Holy Spirit when it calls us to humble ourselves, serve somebody, encourage somebody, or give something away. This is what Paul told the Ephesian elders about one of his leadings: “Now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (Acts 20:22–23). Paul was being asked to sacrifice safety and comfort for the sake of the Kingdom. Not every leading from God will involve pain and sacrifice, but expect that often. God’s leadings will mean making gut-wrenching decisions that test the limits of our faith. “Many of God’s leadings will require you to choose between being comfortable and building a godly character, amassing money and seeking first God’s kingdom, being a winner in the world’s eyes and being a winner in God’s eyes (Hybels 1998, 164).

5. It Will Stand the Test of Time

Ask: As I obey this leading, is the Holy Spirit confirming it?

As we daily spend time in prayer and respond to what we believe to be God’s leading, we will either have a growing sense of the Holy Spirit’s

confirmation, or else we will develop a nagging sense that maybe we did not have it right.

It is possible that we did not hear right. On some occasions, and for a variety of reasons, we realize that what we thought was God's leading was not. In such cases, we should take steps to correct the situation as quickly as possible. I have a friend who resigned a pastorate to accept a position halfway across the country. One week into the job he realized that this was not the right move for him. He cut his losses and returned to seek God's further direction. As hard as this must have been, it was still easier than trying to stick it out in a place that was not God's will. God honored his courage to make it right.

It is also possible that we heard right, but the timing was wrong. Sometimes God gives us a vision for a ministry, task, or promise, and we assume that this word is for right now. The counsel of wise friends, family, and counselors can prevent us from pushing the plan before its time. Remember Abraham and Sarah? In their impatience they ended up forcing God's promise for a son in order to bring God's plan to pass, thereby greatly complicating the situation. Even when we are confident that God has spoken, we may need to wait for His timing. If a leading requires you to make a major, life-changing decision in a very short period of time, question it. A little time of waiting is always wise, especially on important decisions. The Bible tells us not to be rash in what we say or hasty in the commitments we make (Ecclesiastes 5:2–5).

It is possible that we are simply facing resistance and need to press forward. As we mentioned regarding the apostles, sometimes the challenges are an indication that we are exactly where we need to be. It is so easy to slip into an immediate perspective without considering the long-range perspective. In the present, looking at physical circumstances, we just do not see how God's word could possibly come to pass. But sometimes, hindsight is bliss. If we are patient, our spiritual hindsight may be correct, and we will be able to look back and see how God was working in our lives and in the situation.

6. God Will Give You the Ability to Achieve It

Ask: What circumstances have confirmed that this leading is God's will for you?

God does not always call the equipped, but He always equips those He calls. No matter what God calls us to do, He will be with us every step of the way, giving us the strength and ability to accomplish it. We can be assured that we serve a God who is big enough to open the right doors, and if God is opening a door, no person can shut it (1 Corinthians 16:9).

God's leadings are usually consistent with the person He made you to be. He uniquely wired you for His purposes. Your spiritual giftings, heart passions, natural abilities, personality, and life experiences all go into making you uniquely prepared to live for Him and serve Him. Some Christians falsely assume that something could not be God's will if it is personally rewarding, satisfying, and brings joy when you do it. Some people seem to think that God creates a person with certain gifts and then expects them to excel in totally unrelated fields. But why do you assume God's leadings would contradict who He made you to be? Why would He design you for one purpose and then ask you to fulfill another? To be sure, He loves to stretch our abilities and expand our potential, and that often involves leading us along untried paths. That does not mean, however, that He ignores our gifts and inherent interests. After all, He gave them to us in the first place so that we could serve Him more effectively. Instead, He strengthens our natural abilities and builds on them (Hybels 1998, 162).

7. God Will Be Glorified by It

Ask: What is likely to be the result (outcome) of this leading?

So we must stop and consider, "what is likely to be the fruit of this leading?" Will this bring glory and honor to the name of the Lord? Will it bear fruit in faith (belief) and faithfulness (behavior) on the part of the one receiving it? Does it help me to be conformed to the image of Christ? Is it consistent with the fruit of the Spirit? Does it promote the growth of Christ's character in me? Answering *yes* to these questions is a good indication of God's speaking.

Speak Lord, Your Servant Is Listening

It is a terrible loss when believers are so paralyzed by fear of counterfeit leadings that they close their ears to the Holy Spirit's leadings too. A truly dynamic, authentic, exciting Christian life can only be experienced as we are led by the Holy Spirit. As we open ourselves to hear from God by whatever means He deems appropriate, He will faithfully speak to our hearts.

Hearing from God is not as difficult as some make it. It involves a process of listening, testing, discerning, and obeying. The Holy Spirit will often bring several means of guidance together in a process that brings confidence to respond in obedience. When these factors converge (Word of God, the counsel of mature Christian friends, circumstances, the Spirit's conviction in prayer, and so forth), it is usually a sign that God is leading. Therefore we listen, fully expecting to hear His voice.

Chapter 5: Teach Us To Pray: The Discipline of Prayer

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you see the word *discipline*? Chances are it is probably not something very pleasant. I think of the times my mother disciplined me and said, “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” At best, we might think of disciplining ourselves as the process of becoming proficient at a sport or a musical instrument. That kind of discipline involves pain and long, hard work—hardly exciting.

What about *spiritual* disciplines? When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many have a similar response. Often believers feel that spiritual discipline is a drudgery or an arduous obligation. If you have felt that way, that is okay; you are not alone. Many Christians feel guilty for not doing enough in their daily walk with God. Or, when they do practice the spiritual disciplines, it may be merely out of a sense of duty.

Olympic medalists will tell you that while training was hard, it was worth all of the work. The victory of winning makes them forget the struggle—they would do it over again. So it is with spiritual disciplines. Believers who persevere and experience spiritual victory will tell you it is worth the struggle. As we discover the practical benefits, as well as the freedom and joy of spiritual disciplines, we will look at them differently.

In this chapter, we will consider the purpose and benefits of practicing spiritual disciplines, focusing on the discipline of prayer. Our goal is to gain fresh understanding of the positive impact that the discipline of prayer can have in our lives and how fulfilling a dynamic prayer life can be.

Lesson 5.1 Pathway to Soul Shaping: The Spiritual Disciplines

Objectives

- 5.1.1 Define spiritual disciplines.*
- 5.1.2 Explain the importance of a training mentality when practicing spiritual disciplines.*
- 5.1.3 Recognize both proper and improper motivations for practicing spiritual disciplines.*
- 5.1.4 Identify four limits of the disciplines.*
- 5.1.5 Summarize two benefits we can expect from the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines.*

Lesson 5.2 Pathway to Intimacy: The Spiritual Discipline of Prayer

Objectives

- 5.2.1 Give a working definition for the discipline of prayer.*
- 5.2.2 List four means by which prayer is learned.*
- 5.2.3 Discuss five practical suggestions for enhancing the practice of prayer.*

Lesson 5.1 Pathway to Soul Shaping: The Spiritual Disciplines

What are Spiritual Disciplines?

What are spiritual disciplines and how do they help Christians?

Spiritual disciplines are any personal or corporate practices we intentionally engage in for the purpose of promoting spiritual growth in our lives. The New Testament Greek word translated “discipline” in the NASB is *gumnisa*, from which the English words gymnasium and gymnastics derive. This word means “to exercise or discipline,” similar to physical exercise. Just as physical exercise promotes physical strength, so spiritual exercise

promotes spiritual strength. Tom Landry, former coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team, said, “The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be.” Likewise, the job of the disciplines is to help Christians do something they would not naturally do in order to become what they have always wanted to be (like Jesus Christ).

Lesson objective

Define spiritual disciplines.

Historically, the church has called these spiritual disciplines the “means of grace.” This simply refers to the means, or avenues, by which we make ourselves open and available to the grace of God working in our lives. Many different disciplines have been practiced by believers through the centuries. Classic disciplines include prayer, reading God’s Word, fasting, worship, meditation, silence, solitude, and so on. Yet in reality, when we understand all of life as our spiritual act of worship, we realize that any practice we engage in on a regular basis in order to promote spiritual growth could be considered a spiritual discipline. Thus, many writers have broadened the definition to include practices such as confession, celebration, journaling, learning, simplicity, guidance, stewardship, and evangelism. Whatever the activity, the crucial element is that it is being practiced for the purpose of allowing God to shape our souls.

Proper Mentality toward Spiritual Disciplines

Lesson objective

Explain the importance of a training mentality when practicing spiritual disciplines.

John Ortberg, in his book *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, shares valuable insight regarding the proper mind-set for approaching our practice of the spiritual disciplines. He emphasizes the immense difference

between *training* to do something and *trying* to do something. So many Christians earnestly try to do what it takes to grow spiritually. But trying hard can accomplish only so much. If you are serious, you will have to enter into a life of training. Athletes do not just try, they train. Musicians do not just try, they train. Training is required for any significant challenge in life—including spiritual growth (Ortberg 2002, 43).

Why is it important for Christians to *train* rather than *try* to be like Jesus?

It follows, then, that we should be training to be like Jesus. This echoes Paul's writing in 1 Timothy 4:7: "Train yourself to be godly." The New Testament emphasizes the relationship between self-control and godliness (2 Peter 1:6; Galatians 5:23). We must have self-control (expressed in the disciplines) before we can be godly. Spiritual growth is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely. The occasional jogger does not suddenly enter a marathon. Rather, he or she prepares and trains over a period of time, and so should we with the spiritual disciplines, such as prayer. When a training regiment is followed, we can expect to pray a year from now with greater consistency and spiritual success than at present.

The Greek language used by Paul in 1 Timothy 4:7 makes it plain that godliness is a command, not a suggestion. Christlikeness is not just a nice idea to go after if we feel like being good, but is the responsibility of every Christian. If godliness is not optional, then neither is the means to godliness (spiritual disciplines). God expects every Christian to engage in activities that will facilitate his or her lifelong pursuit of spiritual transformation. This will involve entering into a lifetime of training.

While we know this cognitively, for many Christians, putting it into practice is another story. If your prayer life is not where you think it should be, let me ask you: what has contributed most to your lack of success? Is it not knowing the right information or not doing what you know? For most, it is a matter of not doing what they know. We fail to do what we know we should do. Why? Perhaps we do not have the proper motivation for practicing the disciplines.

Lesson objective

Recognize both proper and improper motivations for practicing spiritual disciplines.

Motivations for Practicing Spiritual Disciplines

It is possible for believers to engage in the disciplines for the wrong reasons. Consider some of the following motivations for carrying out spiritual disciplines.

What are some improper motivations for practicing spiritual disciplines and what makes each one improper?

Some People Engage in the Disciplines Out of Guilt and Obligation

Honestly, many Christians admit they are motivated by guilt. They feel that somehow they are not measuring up to what a *good* Christian should do. Often, this kind of guilt is a product of an externally oriented, legalistic approach to spiritual disciplines that place strict or specific demands on people. You may have grown up hearing, “Any good Christian will pray at least ‘x’ minutes a day. If not, you really are not serious about your faith.” The danger here is the tendency to reduce the disciplines to duties performed out of a sense of obligation. In so doing, usually the practice is not fresh and meaningful, because our heart is not in it. We can completely miss the joy and delight in the transformation journey because it simply becomes a ritual—a ritual that can even lead to feelings of smug self-righteousness and pride. And when the disciplines degenerate into merely external requirements, they can be used to manipulate and control people. Remember, we are not simply called to perform a duty so that we can check it off in our daily to-do list. Granted, there will be days when we do not feel like praying, and our prayer is initiated more out of a commitment to be obedient and faithful in prayer. This is not a bad thing, as long as our

commitment flows out of a larger understanding of why we are committed to prayer.

Some People Engage in Disciplines to Keep Up Appearances or Satisfy Others' Expectations

Some Christians are so concerned about what others think of them (pastors, friends, co-workers, and family) that they simply go through the motions in order to satisfy the expectations of others. Besides having a terrible case of the *disease to please* or “approval addiction” (Ortberg 2002), it completely misses the point when prayer is used to please others instead of God. Jesus clearly rejected this motivation. He taught His disciples, “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men” (Matthew 6:5). We need to learn to live (and pray) for an audience of One.

Similarly, some people engage in the disciplines based solely on comparing themselves with others. Some have no frame of reference where they are spiritually or what they need to do; they simply see that someone else did such and such, and so they must do that as well. There are several problems with using others as our standard of comparison. What if the people you watch are selling themselves short of what God has called them to do? You could be lulled into a false sense of security. What if the people you watch are in a season of life that allows them to spend much more time each day in spiritual disciplines than is realistic for most people? You could heap additional, and unnecessary, guilt on yourself. What about the fact that God may not be asking the same thing of us right now that He is asking of someone else? We all have different areas needing growth based on our personalities, experiences, or seasons in life. Furthermore, when we compare ourselves to others we forget that we can only see a slice of their lives (what they want us to see), and just because someone looks like they have it together on the outside does not necessarily say anything about their true spiritual state. Instead of wasting our time worrying about what others think and do, we should spend time focusing on what God thinks about our practice of the disciplines. Ask yourself, “Am I engaging in activities that

will help me reflect the image of Christ to a greater extent?” “Am I more like God today than I was yesterday? Last week? Last year?”

Some People Engage in the Disciplines for Self-Serving Purposes

Christians can engage in the practice of a given discipline to such an extreme that they may miss the point. For example, have you ever been in the presence of a person obsessed with bodybuilding? The point ceases to be health or strength, but it becomes self-admiration and self-obsession. In such bodybuilders we often see muscle for muscle’s sake. Or, have you ever seen runners who become addicted to running? They seek the *high* and enjoy the strenuous exertion for their own sake more than for the contribution exercise makes to their total life and health. What started off as a natural desire to engage in healthy activities can be distorted ever so slightly to actually result in a self-absorbed activity.

Similarly, in the excesses of spiritual legalism, which are based on external criteria, we see discipline for discipline’s sake. These people are no longer concerned about taking pains for the purpose of a healthy relationship with Christ. Rather, they are consumed with the practice for ulterior reasons. Just as that bodybuilder focuses on muscle for muscle’s sake, a Christian can focus on fasting for fasting’s sake (or any other discipline). It becomes more of an obsession, and they actually enjoy the strenuous exertion simply as a matter of discipline. They say, “I did it! Look what I was able to accomplish!” When this happens, we lose sight of the reason why we were doing the activity in the first place—developing intimacy with Christ—and it is twisted into a self-absorbed activity.

What are some proper motivations for practicing the spiritual disciplines?

We Should Choose to Engage in the Disciplines Because of Our Love for God

Contrary to all of these things, God wants us to be motivated by a sincere desire to grow in our intimate relationship with Him. A person in love

wants to spend time with his or her lover, talking to him or her about everything. How would you feel if you found out that a person was just spending time with you to fulfill an assignment for school? All the joy would be gone because it would no longer be flowing from a love relationship.

As we grow in love with Jesus, we look forward to spending time with Him, talking with Him, obeying Him, and hanging on every word. Relationship is the key, and we all know that meaningful relationships require time talking to each other. We pray in order to know our God, to become intimate with the One who knows us best. Loving attention to God will result in a growing union with God.

We Should Choose to Engage in the Disciplines out of Desire for Spiritual Transformation

A healthy motivation is to choose to engage in a training regimen for our long-term spiritual benefit. The capacity to abide in God's presence comes only through steady training. If we wish to experience Christ daily, we will need to intentionally practice the spiritual disciplines.

This kind of long-term, intentional approach is necessary since the desired spiritual response to circumstances does not come naturally and, in fact, usually goes precisely against our natural response. Fortunately, if we practice something enough, it will begin to come more naturally. Athletes practice over and over so they can perform correctly at the time of competition. Musicians practice over and over so, at the time of performance, the music will flow naturally. Dr. William C. DeVries, who installed the first artificial heart in a human being, told of the many times he had practiced the procedure on animals. Dr. DeVries made this simple yet profound explanation: "The reason you practice so much is so that you will do things automatically the same way every time."

We too, when we practice spiritual disciplines day in and day out, are preparing ourselves for those testing times, the moments in life that will reveal who we really are. The only thing that spills out of a glass is what is already in it. When life jostles you, does a gracious response spill out? Or is it a response of anger or cynicism? What are your automatic responses?

What would you like them to be? Spiritual disciplines will help develop these reflexes in our souls (Rumford 1996, 88).

Lesson Objective

Identify four limits of the disciplines.

The Limits of the Disciplines

In what four ways are the spiritual disciplines limited?

The spiritual disciplines are not a secret cure-all that, if practiced, will in and of themselves, ensure instant transformation into perfect godliness. All we have to do is remember the Pharisees—who prayed and read the Word regularly—to realize that this does not automatically happen. Spiritual disciplines must be understood for what they can and cannot do.

Spiritual Disciplines Are Only a Means to Godliness; They Are Not an End in Themselves

Do you play a musical instrument? What if the only thing to it was to play scales? There is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music. So it is with practicing spiritual disciplines apart from the purpose for which they are intended—to grow in our relationship with God. Practicing a spiritual discipline so we can say we did it is not the end-all goal.

There are pious, religious people who do not have a growing relationship with God. Just because I fast and pray does not mean that I have communed with God. If we are not careful, we can get so caught up in the mechanics of the discipline and the external requirements of carrying out the discipline, that we actually forget why we are doing them. The disciplines become an end in themselves, rather than a means of experiencing God's transformation in our lives. Remember, all the disciplines or works in the

world cannot make us holy; growth in holiness is a gift from God (John 7:17; Ephesians 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 2:11).

So what is the point? Why practice the disciplines if they, in and of themselves, cannot guarantee our growth? When we practice the disciplines we put ourselves in a place where God can work in us. The spiritual disciplines serve as channels of God's transforming power. As we practice them, God's grace flows to us and we are changed. We train in the spiritual life so that we have the ability to live rightly. It is not fasting for fasting's sake, but fasting so that we can feast on God. We should not pray for prayer's sake, but so that we can commune with the One who knows us best and desires to work in us. The disciplines of the spiritual life are a means, not an end. The end is to glorify God; the end is righteousness, peace, and joy; the end is a wild, hilarious love relationship with God in which we freely live and do the will of God.

Spiritual Disciplines May Not Always Seem Exciting

Disciplines, as the everyday means of character transformation, do not always have the fireworks of the special times when God grants infusions of grace. We would much rather have mountaintop experiences than have to faithfully plod through day-by-day. Yet this is the origin of the majority of our growth. At times, practicing spiritual disciplines can be like taking vitamins. Say each day you take a multi-vitamin and vitamin C. As you take them, do you feel energized? You probably do not. Swallowing them is not necessarily something that you get excited about, but you know that through a daily practice of taking vitamins, you strengthen your body's defenses. It is the same way spiritually. We may not feel an emotional charge, but we will be building our spiritual defenses, making us strong spiritually. It is easy to undervalue this fundamental means of spiritual growth. The disciplines appear so commonplace, quiet and unimpressive, yet we have to remember that they are the primary means by which we will grow spiritually.

Spiritual Disciplines Require Work for Growth

In one important sense the spiritual disciplines are not hard. They can be practiced by recent converts, and we do not have to have a degree in theology in order to engage in the disciplines. In another sense, however, the disciplines are difficult to carry out. They require patience, faithfulness, and commitment. Author Donald Whitney writes, “The gold of godliness is not found on the surface of Christianity. It has to be dug from the depths with the tools of the Disciplines.” In short, it requires hard work. Discipline involves foregoing what we want for the moment, for the sake of what we want from a lifetime (Rumford 1996, 86).

While our job is cut out for us—thankfully it is done with God’s help. Philippians 2:12–13 says, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” One role of the Holy Spirit is to produce within us the desire and the power for the disciplines that lead to godliness. Second Timothy 1:7 states, “For God did not give us the spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.” If help is needed, make it a matter of regular prayer. Regularly ask the Holy Spirit to come alongside and help as you faithfully carry out the disciplines.

Spiritual Disciplines Require Time for Growth

In our instant society, we are impatient if we have to wait two whole minutes for the copy machine to warm up or if our e-mail takes longer than a minute to get to the other side of the country. The mind-set of instant satisfaction can lead to serious spiritual frustration. At times, spiritual transformation seems painfully slow. The transformation process takes place little-by-little, by passing from one degree to another with faithful diligence and patience. Francis de Sales pictured it this way: “The soul that rises from sin to devotion may be compared to the dawning of the day, which at its approach does not expel the darkness instantaneously but only little-by-little.”

Intimacy with God is a lifelong journey. You are not going to attain perfect intimacy because you have had a great week of revival, attended an inspiring seminar, read a motivational book on prayer, or completed this course. We are not even going to attain it in this lifetime because there will always be more of God for us to explore! So train by patiently, diligently,

and regularly practicing the spiritual disciplines. It takes persistent, hard work, but it will pay off in the long run.

Lesson objective

Summarize two benefits we can expect from the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines.

The Result of Consistent Practice of Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual Disciplines Are a Path to Becoming More Christlike

What are two benefits from consistent practice of spiritual disciplines?

“Train yourself to be godly” (1 Timothy 4:7). As we strive for spiritual transformation through the practice of the disciplines, our lives will increasingly operate in the dominion of the Spirit, reflecting godly character and perspective. As we are faithful, God, through His Spirit, is determined to pursue this good work in us to the end. Discipline builds habits; habits build character; and character builds destiny.

Spiritual Transformation Brings Freedom and Joy

Richard Foster (1988) reminds us, “Freedom comes through the mastery of any discipline.” As we grow in godliness, we shed our enslavement to human sinful tendencies and attain new freedom in Christ. We are freed from the responsibility of producing in our own strength because we realize it is God who does the work in our lives. Such freedom is exhilarating and results in joy. With the proper goal, disciplines become a delight, not drudgery. Maybe they would more appropriately be called *spiritual delights* than *spiritual disciplines*. Discipline with direction results in the joy of a spiritually disciplined life.

Lesson 5.2 Pathway to Intimacy: The Spiritual Discipline of Prayer

While many disciplines can enrich the life of a believer, we turn our focus now, specifically, to the classic discipline of prayer.

The Discipline of Prayer

Lesson Objective

Give a working definition for the discipline of prayer.

The discipline of prayer refers to the regular practice of personal communion and dialogue with the living God. It involves our being intentional in establishing a meeting place where we draw near to God, enjoying worship, fellowship, and communication with our Creator. Prayer is relational speech (person-to-person communication), that becomes the central avenue God uses to transform us. “Prayer should not be limited to structured times but should also become an ongoing dialogue with God as we practice his presence in the context of our daily activities” (Boa 2001, 83).

Seen from a biblical perspective, prayer is an opportunity and a privilege rather than a burden or a duty. In Chapter 2 of our study, we examined the prayer life of Jesus and saw that He prayed regularly. If Jesus needed to pray, how much more do we? Clearly, Jesus assumed His followers would pray regularly. “Then Jesus told his disciples ... they should always pray” (Luke 18:1). “And when you pray ... this, then, is how you should pray” (Matthew 6:5–9). What a privilege to follow in our Master’s footsteps and learn this discipline that served as a central guiding force behind His life and ministry.

Practice Makes Perfect: Prayer Is Learned

Lesson Objective

List four means by which prayer is learned.

How is prayer learned?

For many believers, it is liberating to learn that prayer involves a learning process. It can set us free to experiment, and even to fail, when we know we are learning. Richard Foster illustrates this with the example of a television set. If we turn on the television and it does not work, we do not automatically assume that all televisions do not work. We fix it. So it is with prayer. If our prayers are not working properly, or if we cannot get ourselves to pray regularly, we must do something to fix the problem, not dismiss prayer as an impossible endeavor that does not work (Muck 1985, 29). Consider four ways that we learn to pray.

1. Prayer Is Learned by Praying

If you have ever studied a foreign language, you know that one of the best ways to learn a foreign language is to immerse yourself in it. Speak it. The same is true with the language of prayer. The best way to learn how to pray is to pray. Andrew Murray makes a powerful statement: “I might listen for a year to a professor of music playing the most beautiful music, but that won’t teach me to play the instrument” (Murray 1984). We can talk about prayer, read about prayer, and listen to others pray, but at some point we have to start praying.

As a person begins to pray, he or she should heed a couple of words of advice. First, be yourself when you pray. Do not try to imitate other Christians or try to use all the lingo that you have heard in their prayers. If we cannot be authentic in our own private prayer closet, where can we? Second, talk to God simply and honestly. Have you ever watched a child pray? His or her prayers are so sincere, simple, and full of faith. The same is true for new converts. They do not know all the jargon, so they just pour out their hearts in their own words. Here is the prayer of one new convert at a mid-week prayer meeting.

Hello Lord? This is Jim. I am the one who met you last Thursday, remember? I am sorry; I cannot say it the way the rest of these guys say it,

but I really love you. Honestly, I do. And hopefully, after I know you a while, I will be able to say it a lot better. Thanks a lot. I will see you later.

We need to be honest before God—just talk to Him. A child of God grows in his or her ability to pray confidently in the power of God.

2. Prayer Is Learned by Praying with Others

The disciples learned by watching Jesus. They learned not only by hearing Him teach about prayer, but also by being with Him when He prayed. We can learn by example too. Make it a point to pray with those who can model true prayer for you. A couple of words of caution should be shared here. First, be sure to learn principles of prayer, not phrases of prayer. Second, make sure your prayer times do not become sessions where you repeat all the gossip you have heard.

3. Prayer Is Learned by Reading about Prayer

We cannot read about prayer *instead* of praying. We must read about prayer *in addition to* praying. Reading about prayer from wise Christians can be a valuable way to learn. This allows us to *walk* with them and learn their insights on how to pray. “He who walks with the wise grows wise” (Proverbs 13:20). They are veterans of the trenches of prayer and can help sharpen our weapons of the warfare of prayer. The reference list at the end of this course contains many suggestions for good books on prayer.

4. Prayer Is Learned by the Help of the Holy Spirit

Jesus told His disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach us all things (John 14:26). As we step out in prayer, we grow in our ability to hear God’s voice. We can learn sensitivity to the nudging of the Spirit, and we can respond appropriately to how God is leading us in our prayer.

Getting Beyond Good Intentions: Suggestions for Enhancing Prayer

Lesson Objective

Discuss five practical suggestions for enhancing the practice of prayer.

Having a sound theology and a proper understanding of prayer is one thing, but we must move beyond knowing to actually practicing it in everyday life. We must plan for effective and meaningful prayer. Consequently, we must consider how dynamic prayer can be experienced in the midst of our daily routine. Here are a few ideas to get started:

Create a Conducive Atmosphere for Prayer: Select a Good Time

Select a time that will be conducive to prayer. Establish a time to pray when you are at your best. If you are like me, you were taught that you should pray in the morning, but not everyone is a morning person. The key is to select a time that works for you, and then be consistent. If you think that you will find a different time every day, chances are much greater that you will not find the time at all.

Create a Conducive Atmosphere for Prayer: Select a Good Place

Select a place that will be conducive to prayer. Choose a setting where there will be a minimum of interruptions and distractions. I find that when I am praying I can get distracted by noises that normally I would not even hear. If possible, try to pray away from your phone, pager, computer, or other interrupter. Find a location that supports your prayer efforts. Do you have a favorite chair or a window with an inspiring view? Maybe you are near a park or body of water where you can get alone with God.

Experiment with Varied Venues for Prayer

Maybe your prayer life has become too routine; add some variety. Here are a few suggestions of how you can incorporate new venues for daily prayer.

- Take a pre-dawn walk, listening to the awakening sounds of your world.**
- For one month leave your car radio off and make your morning commute a time of prayer.**
- Take a one- or two-day prayer retreat to a local hotel, retreat center, or monastery.**

- Visit a cemetery or park near your home while the autumn leaves are changing.
- Place an empty chair next to you as a visible reminder that Jesus is really present.
- Walk the streets of an inner city and pray that God will give you a new compassion for those less fortunate than yourself. Pray for God to reveal how you may meet the needs of others in your area.
- Sit in an airport or bus station and observe people carefully. Pray that God will give you a new burden for the lost. Begin interceding for the lost, or pray for God to reveal someone to whom you can reach out.

For a Time, Set Aside Your Normal Bible Reading and Try Praying the Scripture

Richard Foster describes how to do a prayerful reading in which we turn our heart and mind and spirit toward God, allowing the Spirit to guide us. Read slowly, quietly, prayerfully, pausing at any word or phrase where you feel the Spirit's drawing. The Spirit may plumb the depths of our weakness, exposing reasons for our lack of strength and giving us intense longings for a strength that is not our own and not dependent on the winds of circumstances. Pray through the specifics of that passage of Scripture, asking the Lord how it applies to your life, how you should respond, and so forth. Instruction from the Spirit may come, or a song, or peace, or something else (Foster 1988).

Discover the Benefits of a Prayer Journal

Many people have found that keeping a spiritual journal heightens their understanding of the spiritual formation through which God has been taking them. By recording our insights, feelings, and the stream of our experiences, we clarify what God may be saying to us. Journaling enhances personal reflection and introspection; it encourages us to record insights we have received from Scripture; and it serves as another form of prayer.

Chapter 6: Becoming Prayer Warriors: The Habits of Prayer

Every January many of us make New Year's resolutions. We may determine to lose some weight and get in shape. Gyms report that up to 30 percent of all new memberships begin in January! Yet after a brief period—about two weeks—people give up trying to change their habits and slump back to their old ways. Why? It is because our old bad habits are more comfortable than the new ones we are trying to practice. Habits are powerful. We may be unaware of how entrenched even the simplest of our habits can be and how

awkward it feels to try to change them. If left to human nature, we will usually choose the path of least resistance.

Habits are not just restricted to our physical activities. Our spiritual growth, including our effectiveness in prayer, is formed and dictated by our spiritual habits, or habits of the heart. Aristotle noted, “We are what we repeatedly do.” In other words, whatever you practice most is what you will become. It makes sense, then, to be careful in what we practice—especially in regard to our prayer lives. One of the main characteristics of prayer warriors, in Scripture and throughout the history of the church, is their faithfulness in keeping basic habits of the heart.

Do you want to develop a meaningful and powerful prayer life, even if it means choosing the path of greater resistance? If so, you must cultivate healthy prayer habits. This chapter will examine the prayer habits of people who consistently experience successful prayer lives. These biblically based and time-honored habits, when practiced regularly, will transform your prayer life.

Lesson 6.1 Habits of the Heart

Objectives

- 6.1.1 Indicate the benefits of good habits.*
- 6.1.2 Explain the analogy of railroad tracks to developing a habit of prayer.*
- 6.1.3 Summarize five suggestions for cultivating good prayer habits.*

Lesson 6.2 Seven Habits of Highly Effective Prayers

Objectives

- 6.2.1 Name two prerequisites, within our personal lives, necessary for effectiveness in prayer.*
- 6.2.2 List two prerequisites, within our relational lives, necessary for effectiveness in prayer.*
- 6.2.3 Define perseverance as it relates to prayer.*
- 6.2.4 Relate seven benefits of persistence in prayer.*
- 6.2.5 Discuss the impact of maintaining an eternal perspective in prayer.*

6.2.6 State a believer's grounds for boldly praying to God and believing Him for an answer.

6.2.7 Comment on the current season of your soul.

Lesson 6.1 Habits of the Heart

Lesson Objective

Indicate the benefits of good habits.

Anatomy of a Habit

The human brain is amazing! From our birth, millions of bits of information are continually being fed to our brains, yet we are able to make sense of the most important information and act on it. The brain also develops shortcuts to help us function efficiently. Imagine if we had to consciously think through every single decision and action of our daily routine! What if you had to ask yourself these questions every morning: Should I get up now or later? On what side of the bed should I get up? Should I shower? Should I brush my teeth? What route should I drive to work? You get the point; it would be overwhelming. Instead our minds are primed to record responses that can be repeated in the same types of situations. The most important of these responses are called *habits*.

Lesson Objective

Define the word *habit*.

A habit is a recurrent, often unconscious, pattern of behavior that is acquired through frequent repetition. Habits are what we automatically do without thinking—whether good or bad—because they have become conditioned patterns of behavior.

What are the benefits of having good habits in your life?

We need habits (at least good ones), because they help us function. Habits reduce stress. You have made hundreds of decisions already today—you do not remember many of them because they have become habit. They did not require a lot of mental effort and stress. The stress comes when you have to think about something—when you have to consciously make the decision. Without habits—without being able to automate frequently repeated actions—our minds would become preoccupied each time we performed the most simple of tasks. Yet when a task becomes a habit, it is simply performed without thinking. Our habits become our default actions that we habitually carry out without conscious effort, helping us live with less stress and greater efficiency.

Habits and Prayer

Learning to pray is kind of like learning to ride a bicycle. Understanding what needs to be done on a cognitive level helps to a limited degree. But it is only by getting on a bike and riding it, falling over, and trying again repeatedly, that one ultimately masters the activity. Through consistent practice, the child is soon zipping around, without having to focus on the mechanics of riding. Riding a bike has now become a vehicle to take the child to new places.

Lesson Objective

Explain the analogy of railroad tracks to developing a habit of prayer.

Our effectiveness in prayer is determined by the habits we cultivate. We can make a conscious choice to develop positive habits of productive and powerful prayer. Habits have been likened to laying railroad tracks. Once we lay down those rails, we can run on them smoothly and with less stress. Practiced enough, it is possible for our prayer habits to become our default actions that we habitually carry out with little conscious effort. As we no

longer have to focus on the mechanics of prayer, it becomes a vehicle to take us to new places.

In light of this, what prayer habits are you cultivating? Are you cultivating habits that help you develop a more meaningful prayer life? Are your prayer habits positive and productive, or are they negative and limiting? Deep down, you know the answer to these questions.

Cultivating Good Prayer Habits

Our ability to pray effectively depends to a great extent on the quality of the habits we develop. Good habits free us to focus on our interaction with God while bad prayer habits encumber us, limit us, and prevent us from moving forward in our prayer lives. Now and then we should evaluate the way we are going. It does not make any sense to keep going if we are going the wrong way. Those who want to improve their prayer lives will choose to replace their bad habits with good ones. The more we understand the power of our habits, the more we will endeavor to avoid bad habits and adopt good ones.

Lesson Objective

Summarize five suggestions for cultivating good prayer habits.

When it comes to our prayer habits, it is our responsibility to place those railroad tracks. We must create an atmosphere where positive prayer habits are cultivated and encouraged and bad habits are squelched. Old habits die hard. Bad habits die harder. Remember, we have been conditioned to respond a certain way, and we are taking the path of least resistance. However, bad habits can be broken, and good habits can be learned. Here are some general guidelines that apply to cultivating any habit:

- 1. Recognize your need for change*

What are five ways you can cultivate good prayer habits?

Motivation is an essential starting point if we are going to be successful at instituting a new habit. We must admit that not all is right in our prayer lives or that we would like to get more out of our prayer lives. Once we identify what needs changing, then we can do something about it.

2. *Realize that change does not happen without struggle and effort*

Sometimes that struggle is the adjustment of our schedule or lifestyle to incorporate whatever habit we are trying to establish. Forces are working against our efforts towards the good (our own sinful nature and weaknesses of the flesh and even satanic forces). Having a realistic expectation of the resistance we will face can help us to set up the correct routine and stick with it. If we run with patience the race that is set before us, God will give us the strength and grace to continue.

3. *Turn your good intentions into action*

This should go without saying, but unfortunately it is where we most often fall short. The road to prayerlessness is paved with good intentions. We must actually begin the process of practicing whatever areas we are trying to make into a habit. Most people have good intentions, but ultimately all is naught if we do not move from contemplation to action.

4. *Discipline yourself to practice the habit consistently*

Every parent understands the importance of consistency when it comes to disciplining a child. Any break from the regular pattern can cause a mom or dad to lose all ground gained, and the parent find him- or herself back at ground zero. Likewise, consistency is not an option when it comes to forming good habits. We have no substitute for self-discipline, so be diligent to correct any departure from the desired habit immediately. Habits are formed by consistent repetition. It will not do any good if we cannot maintain the new action. Remember all the health clubs that grow rich on people who take initial action and join, but do not sustain their use of their membership for longer than a couple of weeks.

5. *Concentrate on one habit at a time*

Once you have determined you need to form new habits, begin replacing bad ones with good ones. It is okay to tackle one at a time. As you do, simply keep watch over those habits already formed. Do not feel as if you have to accomplish everything overnight. As long as you make it part of your routine to cultivate good habits in your prayer life on a regular basis, you will begin to gain momentum and keep traveling in the right direction.

Meaningful prayer, then, is not so much a series of acts, but a series of habits—habits of the heart. Those habits we develop in our prayer lives will determine the outcome of our communication with God. It has been said: “If you sow an act, you will reap a habit; if you sow a habit you will reap a character; if you sow a character, you will reap a destiny.” In the habits of our hearts lie the foundations of effective prayer and the makings of spiritual destiny.

Lesson 6.2 Seven Habits of Highly Effective Prayers

Lesson Objective

Name two prerequisites, within our personal lives, necessary for effectiveness in prayer.

In his best-selling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey makes the case that effective and successful people—people of purpose—have certain ways of doing things, certain habits in common. Eventually, it is our habits—that are learned by practice—that will determine our effectiveness in life. The same can be said of prayer. Highly effective prayer warriors have certain ways of approaching prayer, certain prayer habits in common. Eventually, it is these habits—learned by practice—that determine their success in prayer. The following section highlights seven habits of highly effective pray-ers.

Habit 1: Effective Prayers Have Their Hearts in Order

Why are righteousness and humility necessary for effectiveness in prayer?

Scripture reveals several prerequisites within our personal lives, necessary for effectiveness in prayer. These have to do with living in right relationship with God. Two of these matters of the heart—righteousness and humility—will be discussed here.

Righteousness

A vital foundation for effective prayer is living in right relationship with God. James writes, “The prayer of the *righteous* person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). James’ readers might have been thinking, “That is fine for elders, but I am just an ordinary Christian. How can I pray for others, especially prayers for healing?” James encourages his readers with the example of Elijah. Elijah was an ordinary person, yet he had an extraordinary God who heard and answered prayer. James cites Jewish tradition that speaks of Elijah’s earnest prayer that it would not rain. God honored his prayer and it did not rain for three and a half years. As believers we are *righteous*, so our prayers are also powerful and effective. And as long as we stand righteous before Him, we can boldly pray with confidence that our omnipotent God will hear and answer our prayer.

Humility

A second prerequisite to effective prayer is humility. Jesus’ story of the Pharisee and the tax collector poignantly illustrates God’s responsiveness to a humble heart.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home

justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9–14)

Much of the impact of this story is lost to the modern reader, for we already think of the Pharisees as hypocrites and the tax collectors as those who receive the grace of God. But Jesus’ original hearers would have thought that it was the pious Pharisee who deserved acceptance by God. He was the faithful churchgoer who was present every time the church doors were open, served on the missions committee, taught Sunday school, and volunteered at the homeless shelter. The tax collector was the dishonest politician accused of embezzling. Surprisingly, Jesus condemns the Pharisee’s self-righteous prayer. Why? Where the Pharisee was proud, the tax collector was ashamed. Where the Pharisee was self-righteous, the tax collector was filled with guilt and remorse. Where the Pharisee was blind to his pride and self-righteousness, the tax collector recognized his true state—that he was cut off from God, corrupt in his heart and actions. Simply, sincerely, and with deep humility, the tax collector casts himself at the feet of God.

Jesus highlights the point of the parable (and a paradox of the spiritual life): exalting ourselves leads to humbling, while humbling ourselves leads to exaltation. To exalt oneself is to attempt to enhance one’s honor, fame, position, or power. Conversely, to humble oneself is to become repentant by recognizing one’s spiritual poverty. Humbling ourselves means to acknowledge our need of God’s help every day and that aside from Him we are nothing, and can do nothing. Consequently, we maintain complete dependence on Him, not ourselves. When our prayer flows from a heart of humility, God will respond by pouring out His grace and lifting us up (James 4:6, 10).

Neither of these heart conditions (righteousness and humility) is new. In the Old Testament, God said, “If my people will humble themselves and pray, and turn from their sin, I will hear their prayer” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Habit 2: Effective Prayers Have their Houses in Order

Lesson Objective

List two prerequisites, within our relational lives, necessary for effectiveness in prayer.

How do our personal relationships affect our prayer lives?

In addition to being in right relationship with God, we must also be in right relationship with others. Two prerequisites for effectiveness in prayer include healthy personal relationships and corporate unity.

Good Relationships

Another prerequisite to effective prayer is being in right relationship with those closest to us. Scripture is clear: bad relationships and unforgiveness hinder our prayers (1 Peter 3:7; Matthew 5:23–24; 6:14; Job 42:10; 1 Corinthians 11:29–30). Peter stresses the importance of keeping relationships in good order because the lack of harmony between husband and wife can cause prayers to go unanswered (1 Peter 3:7). Our relationship with God can be no better than our part of the relationships with our spouses and loved ones. Since Christians are meant to live in a community of love, some prayers will not be answered until poor relationships are restored. Failure to address relationship problems will affect our relationship with God. “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

This does not mean that Christian relationships should never experience conflict, but when they do, rather than avoid conflict, we must work to resolve it. We must work through issues as they come up and not put them off. “In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26). According to Scripture, having conflict does not indicate spiritual immaturity; but, failure to solve conflict properly does.

Corporate Unity

What is the result of unity within the body of Christ in regard to prayer?

A final prerequisite to effective prayer is corporate unity. Unity within the body of Christ results in God's presence and responsiveness to prayer. Jesus revealed the power of unity in relationship to prayer when He taught this: " 'I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them' " (Matthew 18:19–20).

The early Christians practiced this principle. As they gathered together to pray with Peter and John, "they lifted their voices to God with one accord" (Acts 4:24, NASB). The phrase translated "with one accord" is the Greek word *homothumadon* that literally means "unanimous." In other words, they prayed to God with "one voice." They could pray with one voice because "All the believers were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32), and God did amazing works in response to their prayers. What a wonderful description of authentic, spiritual unity. The early Christians shared life together on the deepest of levels. Only God is able to provide that kind of unity. It cannot be organized or legislated or mandated. It is a quality of spiritual unity that is provided only by the Holy Spirit. When Jesus rules our hearts and minds, only then can we experience true spiritual unity.

Just what does corporate unity have to do with prayer? When the community gathers in Christ's name, seeks His will, and reaches consensus, Jesus is present among them, guiding their deliberations and empowering them to act. And when the presence of God is in the gathered community, God's power is mediated within the community. Spiritual power, as seen in God's responsiveness to prayer, is a corporate reality.

Habit 3: Effective Prayers Are Persistent

What does it mean to be persistent in prayer?

We have been taught that patience is a virtue, but we sure do not like to practice it. We are products of an instant society, used to getting what we want instantly. Author Philip Yancey notes, "Ten years ago I responded to letters within a couple of weeks and kept my correspondents happy. Five

years ago, I faxed a response in a couple of days and they seemed content. Now they want e-mail responses the same day and berate me for not using instant messaging or a mobile phone” (Yancey 2006, 24). We are products of a culture of instant gratification, and this spills over to our prayer lives.

Lesson Objective

Define perseverance as it relates to prayer.

Many Christians feel like giving up if they do not see a fairly quick response to their prayers. But praying, like so many matters of the kingdom of God, is like farming. Imagine a farmer turning the soil, adding fertilizer, planting seeds, and sprinkling a little water. Then imagine him standing over the spot for a few hours, waiting for something to happen, and when no shoot comes up, walking away, shaking his head and saying, “I guess that did not work.” Farmers know better. Crops take persistent cultivation and time to yield a harvest, and often it is the same with prayer (Patterson 2001, 106–107).

Persistence, or perseverance, in prayer speaks of a willingness to pray in faith until the answer comes. It does not mean irreverently demanding what we want, but asking repeatedly with bold confidence. Persistence in prayer does not mean overcoming God’s reluctance or annoying God until He gives in. It means continuing with unashamed confidence to request what we know is His will, even though the answer is delayed. Persistent prayer does not change God’s will, but it is often His way of accomplishing His will (and it does change us). So we pray persistently, not to change God’s will, but to see it done.

The late theologian Stanley Grenz offers helpful insight on persevering in prayer. In addition to considering the most common arguments against persistence in prayer, he argues for the legitimacy and value of persistent prayer (Grenz 2006, 81–89).

Arguments Against Persistence in Prayer

Some have suggested that believers should not bring a specific request to God more than once. First, they argue that this reveals a lack of faith that God's answer is forthcoming. If a believer truly has faith that God has heard, then one can simply leave the request with God. Any additional supplication indicates a lack of genuine trust in God's love and goodness. Such an argument could be used to declare that we should not bring any requests to God, for, as Jesus said, God knows the needs of His children before they ask. If a second and third asking show a lack of faith, the first request does so as well. However, Scripture is clear that God desires to act in response to human prayer, so rather than showing a lack of faith in God, perseverance in prayer actually reveals great faith in God's willingness to respond. Persevering prayer requires a continual exercise of faith that the answer will come, despite the present experience of God's silence.

A second argument arises from a statement Jesus made, which is understood as a warning against repetitious praying: "Do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words" (Matthew 6:7). In this text, however, Jesus is not warning against repetition in prayer, but against the mistaken understanding that many words guarantee the attention of God. In many non-Christian religions, the name of a god or a brief prayer is repeated hundreds of times a day with the belief that mentioning the god's name or saying the magical sentence builds up merit or obtains answers. Jesus warns against such empty, useless repetitions. They differ vastly from thoughtful, meaningful repetitions based on the Word of God (Myer 1983, 122). Prayer, Jesus declares, is not a work that demands a hearing before God as if He were indebted to them for their great prayer or as if He worked by magic in response to prayer. This is the attitude of the pagans. God's response comes, not because of the merit of human prayer, but because God has chosen to use this means to effect His divine plans. The prayer that moves the heart of God is the one offered according to His will, that disavows all self-sufficiency and human merit and invites the sovereign Lord to rule in the situations of life.

The Legitimacy of Persistent Prayer

When we consider the nature and purpose of prayer, along with a more complete awareness of the biblical teaching concerning persistence in prayer, we see that it is both legitimate and beneficial. Believers have a definite need to persist in prayer before God. Scripture specifically speaks of the value of unrelenting prayer (Isaiah 62:6–7; Luke 11:5–8; 18:1–8; Ephesians 1:15–16; Colossians 1:9; 4:12). Jesus told His disciples a parable of the persistent widow to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, “Grant me justice against my adversary.” For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, “Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!” (Luke 18:2–5)

The point of the parable is clear. If sustained pleading can move an unrighteous judge to grant justice, how much more will God, who is the Righteous Judge, hear the unfailing pleas of the oppressed disciples of Jesus and bring justice to their cause at the coming of the Son of Man. Although the primary thrust of this parable relates to the coming of eschatological judgment, there is a secondary application as well. By extension, the parable encourages perseverance in all areas of petition. The sustained plea of God’s child for justice in the world will be honored by God.

Necessary to persistent prayer, however, is praying according to the will of God. Praying according to God’s will means that we do not attempt to manipulate God in prayer. We cannot twist His arm by praying long enough and hard enough; God is sovereign and His will is unchanging. Yet God sovereignly chooses to use our passionate, persistent prayers as an appointed means by which things happen. God is able to achieve His will in response to our prayers. Whenever God’s will is known, steadfast prayer that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven will bring results. Prayer is the releasing of God’s willingness to act. For this reason prayer is powerful when God’s known will is offered in petition. But when the divine will is not known, prayer becomes an important means for discerning God’s will. Persistent prayer becomes a struggle with God (or with His seeming

silence), which eventually gives way to a clearer understanding of God's ways in the world. The deepening perception of God's plan that comes through this process constitutes divine victory in the life of the petitioner. Enduring prayer takes on new significance, for it becomes a valuable guide for redirecting our prayer. Through persistent prayer God can move the mind and change a believer's heartfelt desire.

Lesson Objective

Relate seven benefits of persistence in prayer.

The Value of Persistent Prayer

Does God not already know what we need before we even ask? What sense is there in asking Him repeatedly? God does not need to hear our redundant requests for His own sake. Perhaps, repetition in prayer is more for our sake. We will consider seven benefits that persistent prayer brings to praying Christians.

1. *Our faith grows*

What are the seven benefits that persistent prayer brings to the lives of praying Christians?

As a believer remains steadfast in prayer, bringing his or her request repeatedly to God, personal faith grows. Endurance in the face of unanswered prayer involves an act of faith, and as faith is exercised, it grows. It increases our trust in God as we come to Him repeatedly and see the perfect timing of His answers and His faithfulness.

2. *Our perseverance leads to patience*

As we are forced to wait upon the Lord, we learn steadfastness. We are forced to relax as we wait for God's perfect time and plan.

3. *We are enabled to determine the extent of our desire and need*

Enduring in prayer helps the believer determine the extent of his or her desire and need. Just because one of my children requests a certain toy, I do not rush out to buy it. It is rather the repetition of the child's request that indicates the genuine desire in the child's heart for the item. So, also with human petitions: continued repetition demonstrates a seriousness about a request given to the Lord.

4. *Our dependence increases*

Persistent prayer increases our dependence on God. Enduring in prayer over a long time can leave us feeling tired and helpless. That is good! It can force us to confront our weakness and rely more on God's strength.

5. *Our response becomes genuine gratitude*

Perseverance in prayer results in genuine gratitude for God's response. Gifts that come after a period of waiting and intense effort are highly treasured. Through determined petition and patient waiting we learn true gratitude for what God has done and will do on behalf of His children.

6. *We realize our role*

Persistence in prayer is a process by which a believer realizes his or her own role in answering the voiced request. Sometimes, as we carry the burden in our hearts, we see how we may cooperate with God to meet the need.

7. *We gain a deeper experience with God*

Discuss the impact of maintaining an eternal perspective in prayer.

Persistent prayer allows for a deeper experience with God. As we pray we get to be in God's presence. What happens to us while we pray is at least as notable as the thing we pray for. The praying is often better than the request. Ultimately, God wants to enrich us with something infinitely more valuable than the specific gifts we request—a rich personal experience of himself. Many of us would bypass these deeper blessings of dependence and fellowship if the Lord automatically provided all our needs without our asking or with our asking only once. Our needs and desires spur us to draw near to Him rather than neglect Him. As we wait and keep on praying, we receive the eventual answers with a deeper experience of His presence and goodness.

They Never Missed a Meal

The great prayer warrior, George Mueller, devoted his life to rescuing orphans from the tragic street life that enslaved so many children in England during the time of Charles Dickens and the fictional Oliver Twist. Mueller cared for, fed, and educated thousands of such children. The cost was enormous, yet, amazingly, he never asked anyone for money. Instead, he prayed. He often received immediate and dramatic answers to his requests. For example, one night at bedtime, when the pantry was empty, he prayed that God would provide breakfast for two thousand orphans. The Lord answered and the children ate in abundance at the usual hour the next morning. Miraculously, Mueller's children never missed a meal! While some answers were instantaneous, this remarkable man also practiced persistence in prayer. Sometimes he waited for weeks, months, or years for answers. He waited over fifty years for the salvation of one man. Often his faith was severely tested. But when he knew a request was God's will, he would continue to pray daily, or several times a day, until the answer came. He did not interpret delays as denials. (Myer 1983, 123–124)

Habit 4: Effective Prayers Maintain an Eternal Perspective

Suppose you were planning on moving from Minneapolis to Seattle, where you know you will spend the remaining fifty years of your life. You carefully prepare for the three-day drive by mapping out the distance online and planning the exact itinerary. You pour over every detail of the journey, including what clothing you will wear, where you will refuel the car, what motel you will stay at, all the meals you will eat, and where you will eat them. You have the address for your final destination. Nothing is left to chance, other than the fact that you have made no plans for what you will do when you arrive in Seattle. The absurdity of this scenario is evident, yet the bulk of Christians are living in this way. In this analogy the two-day trip is our earthly sojourn, and the fifty-year stay is our eternal destiny. What is so sad is that what is obviously ludicrous on a temporal scale is acceptable to so many on a spiritual scale. In his great work, *Conformed to His Image*, author Kenneth Boa discusses the importance of maintaining an eternal perspective. Highlights from his insights are included in this section (Boa 2001, 60–62).

One Reality, Two Dimensions

This life has two dimensions: one seen (temporal), the other unseen (eternal) (Colossians 1:16). Of the two, the unseen is larger and more important. In fact, the seen is usually the arena in which the drama of unseen realities is played out. It is the unseen that gives meaning to the seen—the unseen frames it and gives it a reference point (Patterson 2001, 34–35). The temporal and eternal perspectives are competing paradigms of life. We can live as if this world is all there is, or we can view our earthly existence as a brief pilgrimage designed to prepare us for eternity. The biblical view emphasizes the brevity of our earthly sojourn and stresses the urgency of investing our time and energy in a way that will have lasting consequences (Psalm 39:4–7; Isaiah 40:6–8; Hebrews 11; James 4:14; 1:11). By contrast, those who adopt a temporal paradigm typically deny the imminence of death and treat the temporal as though it were eternal.

Sadly, it is easy for Western Christians to get caught up in a temporal paradigm because we live in a temporal arena. The responsibilities and pressures of this world clamor for our attention and tend to squeeze our inner lives and starve our souls. We lose sight of the things that matter, and

we focus on the things that are passing away. Apostle John warns about this when he writes, “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. The world is passing away ... but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15–17). I was keenly reminded of how easy it is to develop a temporal focus the summer I spent in Uganda, Africa. Each weekend, my husband and I traveled from village to village, preaching in churches. The country was experiencing severe drought, and most people were wondering where their next meal would come from. After one service, the pastor presented us with a love offering of five eggs that could have been used for their food or to produce more chickens for even more food. The depth of their tremendous sacrifice brought tears to our eyes. My husband said to me, “This is the largest honorarium I have ever received for preaching.” To this day, he keeps those five hollowed-out eggshells in a basket in his office—a visible reminder of the things that matter in life. When we are tempted to shift focus to the temporal, all we have to do is look at those eggs.

It takes great risk to shift to a biblical paradigm, because it challenges everything that our culture reinforces. The more we have invested in the temporal paradigm, the more we think we have to lose by changing to the biblical paradigm. If we could just remember the brevity of our sojourn here, we would determine to pursue the things that will last rather than the things that are passing way. We would choose to transfer our affections and ambitions from the immediate to things of our ultimate home, heaven. To do this, we must learn to see with new eyes—life through God-colored glasses.

Correcting Spiritual Myopia

What does it mean to be *nearsighted* in your prayer life?

Our earthly perspective is so evident in our prayer lives. Many Western Christians suffer from spiritual myopia (nearsightedness that focuses on the temporal, the here-and-now, rather than on the eternal). Our prayers are more of a wish list of all the things we think we need, rather than a sincere desire to touch the heart of God. When we lose God’s view of things we lose perspective on everything else. Distinctions between the good, the better, and the best—even good and evil—grow fuzzy (Patterson 2001, 34–35).

Maintaining an eternal perspective changes how we pray. The difficulties over which we obsess fall into a different place. The apostle Paul dismissed his grueling ordeals as “light and momentary troubles” because he had in mind an “eternal glory that far outweighs them all ... So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16–18).

Prayer helps correct myopia, calling to mind a perspective I daily forget. I keep reversing roles, thinking of ways in which God should serve me, rather than vice versa. In prayer I shift my point of view away from my own selfishness. I climb above timberline and look down at the speck that is myself. Prayer exposes for a nanosecond what I would prefer to ignore: my own true state of fragile dependence. The undone tasks accumulating at home, my family and every other relation, temptations, health, plans for the future—all these I bring into that larger reality, God’s sphere, where I find them curiously dwarfed ... Prayer is the act of seeing reality from God’s point of view. (Yancey 2006, 20–29)

Over the years, my husband and I have had the opportunity to take part in a variety of adventurous activities. From mountain climbing in ice storms, to scuba diving the depths of the ocean, we have had a lot of exciting experiences together. A couple of summers ago, we went hang-gliding over the South China Sea. From that vantage point, I looked down at the boats in the ocean; they were merely tiny dots. As I sailed over countless dots, I realized how insignificant they were to me at that moment (as I was more concerned about dodging seagulls). I could not help but muse how insignificant those dots seemed, compared to when I scuba dive. When I am deep in the water, the boat is no longer an insignificant dot. Rather, a looming shadow overhead, I keep close tabs on that boat at all times; it is always within my frame of reference—for that boat is my lifeline.

Why is it important to maintain an eternal perspective when we pray?

Sometimes our prayer life can be like this. From God’s perspective (the view from above), the problems of life are mere dots that may almost be insignificant in the big picture. The view from below, however, sees those dots as looming shadows that pull us down and cause us to lose eternal

perspective. As we strive to maintain an eternal perspective in our prayers, we will see life from God's point of view. Does this mean that we should be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good? No! In fact, it is the opposite—when people become heavenly minded, they treasure the passing opportunities of this life and become more alive to the present moment. Rather than being overwhelmed with the problems of life, they understand that these too will pass, and that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Habit 5: Effective Prayers Have an Expectancy that Results in Boldness

Lesson Objective

State a believer's grounds for boldly praying to God and believing Him for an answer.

During our travels in Uganda, each time people discovered that my husband and I had been married for twelve years, yet did not have children, they would offer, “Well, you know, Sister Christine prays for wombs and they are opened.” On our last day in Uganda, who should approach me but Sister Christine. She asked if she could pray for me. Always ready for prayer, I quickly responded, “Yes!” Christine read a psalm, which declared that the barren woman would rejoice for God would give her a son. She then laid hands on me and prayed a simple prayer of faith that God would bless my husband and me with a child and that I would conceive that month. At the conclusion of her short prayer, she requested that I write her a letter when my baby was born. Nine months later I gave birth to a son! In future correspondence I discovered that I was the thirty-first person for whom she had prayed, and all thirty-one had become pregnant the month she prayed for them. I thank God for this woman's sensitivity to God's voice, and her unshakable trust that God would answer her prayer. While I have always believed cognitively that God can and does answer prayer, I was amazed by her unfaltering expectancy that God would answer her prayer—she never even considered otherwise.

What can give us boldness in our prayer life?

The Bible tells us that the *fervent* prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16). We pray with fervency when we believe that God can—and will—answer our prayer. Interestingly, most of us pray for God to work in our midst, yet we act surprised when He actually shows up.

Sometimes it takes the eyes of faith to recognize that Jesus is around. Remember when Jesus came walking on the water to the disciples (Mark 6:45–51)? They were convinced He was a ghost. Often in the middle of the storm, tormented by waves of disappointment and doubt, we are no better at recognizing His presence than they were. Jesus often comes when least expected in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm. Those divinely appointed moments—when God calls us to walk on water—will come when we least expect them, and if you are not looking for Him, you just might miss Him. Eleven of the disciples sat in the boat and missed out; only Peter realized that this was an extraordinary opportunity to do something with God that he could never do on his own. Are you looking for God to show up?

When we expect God to respond, the result will be new boldness in our prayer. Boldness does not refer to inappropriate brashness, but to a confidence based on God's character as we respond to His own invitation: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). As our great high priest, Jesus opened unprecedented access to God. Dick Eastman and Jack Hayford (1999) state this in their book *Living and Praying in Jesus' Name*: "Christ extended to His disciples a certain 'power of attorney'—the authority to use His name in transacting business of His behalf."

We tend to want our prayers to be therapeutic—to leave us relaxed. More often than we wish, God would have them leave us stirred up. "No wonder we get bored with prayer! What would happen to us if we really believed that we may affect the way God does His work, and that with holy impertinence we may actually press him?" (Patterson 2001, 114).

Habit 6: Effective Prayers Pray According to the Will of God

Effective pray-ers start with this mentality: “Your will be done.”

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (1 John 5:14–15). We strive to align ourselves with God’s will and purpose, based on the example of Jesus who said: “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30).

Jesus said we can ask of God anything we want and it will be given to us—as long as it is in His name.

Within these parameters is a universe of desires and delights that we may bring to God in prayer—and persist over. By them our own desires and delights are purified and refined. When we regularly pray in the will of God, in the long term we will see God’s good and perfect will done. Or, we may see our prayers answered better than we prayed them. We pray for silver, Luther wrote, but God often gives us gold. When we pray in Jesus’ name, we are expanded, and we begin to see things more clearly, as we learned to see things through His eyes. (Patterson 2001, 117–118)

If something is already God’s will, then why should we bother praying about it?

You may wonder, “If something is already God’s will, then why should we bother praying about it? Do our prayers really make a difference on what God is going to do?” In response, some Christians emphasize the sovereignty of God, to the point that one could wonder why he or she should bother praying, since God already has planned what He is going to do. They emphasize, then, that prayer does not change the world—it changes us. Other Christians emphasize the human ability to pray and actually change the will of God. The Bible actually claims both that God changes reality in response to our prayers and that He is sovereign. God is sovereign, but not in a way that compromises human responsibility to pray; we are responsible, but not in a way that compromises God’s sovereignty (Genesis 50:20; Acts 4:27–28). We are free, and God is freer. The claim that God changes reality in response to prayer need not be

incompatible with His sovereignty if His response to prayer is part of His sovereign will. Just as when God sends rain He also sends clouds as the cause of that rain, when He ordains events He can also ordain prayers as the cause of those events. This is not a limit to His sovereignty, but the ultimate expression of it. From eternity He has woven our prayers into the cause and effect of the universe (Chester 2003, 251–52).

One way to ensure that we pray according to God's will is to allow our prayers to be led by the Spirit who "intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (Romans 8:27). Jesus told His disciples that the Holy Spirit "will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13) and this includes leading and guiding our prayers. As we quiet our hearts and wait before God, we can hear His still, small voice. When we allow the Holy Spirit within to direct our praying, it means our prayer is under God's control. This direction and control sometimes leads us to pray for subjects and persons of whom we are not familiar, as seen vividly in the following story.

One Sunday night in April 1912, the Titanic oceanliner struck an iceberg. Colonel Gracy, a passenger on the ship, helped to launch the few lifeboats that were available. He had resigned himself to death. However, as he slipped beneath the waves, his wife at home was suddenly awakened with great concern for her husband. She prayed for several hours, until peace came. Meanwhile Gracy bobbed to the surface near a capsized boat and eventually was rescued. He and his wife later discovered that during the very hours she was agonizing in prayer, he was clinging desperately to this overturned boat (Crawford 1999, 11).

Comment on the current season of your soul.

Habit 7: Effective Prayers Recognize the Seasons of the Soul

Spiritual life is a living thing; it is not mechanical and cannot be controlled as we can so easily control the technological world around us. "The soul will not be manipulated like a thermostat or turned on and off like a switch. If we are going to cultivate true spiritual growth, we must respect the natural seasons of the soul" (Rumford 1996, 65).

Almost every follower of Christ at some time has experienced a dry season of the soul when prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling. Most of us can look back over our spiritual lives and see periods where we prayed eagerly and often. We were filled with joy and the anticipation of God's blessings. Supernatural things happened in our lives and in the lives of people we prayed for. Then our prayer life began to wind down until we had almost given up on praying. Prayer seemed dry, tedious, and pointless, for God did not seem to be responding. These seasons can last for weeks or even months. And then, suddenly, God's power floods into our lives again, just as before. Once again we delight in coming into God's presence and hearing His voice. Once again we pray often and see results.

Maybe you are in a season of unprecedented intimacy with God—a spring of new beginnings. You have known spiritual thirst in the past, but these days you are flooded with God's presence. Even if you are, I doubt you are feeling as if you have had enough. The more of Him we experience, the more we want to experience Him. We can never get enough of God. Overall, you feel a sense of refreshment, expectancy, and renewed vigor. You are excited about new opportunities and are ready to consider undertaking new commitments, to risk sowing new seeds.

What does it mean when a person is said to be experiencing a dry season of the soul?

But maybe you are in a spiritual winter. Dryness is an occupational hazard of a disciple. It is possible to get stuck in spiritual dryness for so long that you hardly thirst for God anymore. You feel He has been silent, distant, and unresponsive, so you think about giving up on pursuing Him. But the thirst never completely disappears. Even when we seem to have lost our desire for God, something within us aches for the only One who can meet the deepest need of our parched souls (Roberts 2005, 2–3). Jesus understands how you feel—when it seems as if God is not answering. As He hung on the Cross He cried, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Our Savior is very familiar with our times of suffering, when in our aloneness and dryness we cry out to God for refreshing.

A Quotation from John of the Cross

“After a soul has been converted by God, that soul is nurtured and caressed by the Spirit. Like a loving mother, God cares for and comforts the infant soul by feeding it spiritual milk. Such souls will find great delight in this stage. They will begin praying with great urgency and perseverance; they will engage in all kinds of religious activities because of the joy they experience in them. But there will come a time when God will bid them to grow deeper. He will remove the previous consolation from the soul in order to teach it virtue and prevent it from developing vice” (John of the Cross 1542–1591; quoted in Hayford, 2001, 278).

Times of travail—these dry, in-between seasons of the soul—are certain to happen to even the most mature believer. Pastor and author Jack Hayford discusses many possible reasons for these seasons, from sustained seasons of demanding duty, unrelenting temptation, personal tragedy, trying to do it in your own strength, attacks of antagonism and criticism, unresolved doubts, neglect of basic disciplines, and known disobedience. When times of dryness come to the believer—and they will—it can touch areas of his or her life in such a way that it seems God’s presence has evaporated. In these times, remember that seasons of travail mean something is about to be born (Hayford 2001, 270–277).

As we consider our prayer lives, we need to take into account the season we are in. Some disciplines will be more helpful than others for various reasons. Give yourself permission to explore new spiritual disciplines if your current practices seem to be fruitless.

What new prayer habits do you need to cultivate in your life? How can you do that?

I pray that you will spend time thoughtfully reflecting on the seven habits of highly effective pray-ers, and integrating them into your prayer life.

Successful prayer habits can turn your goals for prayer from hopes to reality. How would your prayer life be different if you were in the habit of persevering in prayer? Or, in the habit of praying from God's point of view? Or any other one of the habits? What is one habit of the heart that you most need to cultivate in your prayer life? I challenge you to select one of these seven habits and begin taking steps today to cultivate it in your heart, to assist you in your quest to become a more effective pray-er. I pray that you will find renewed purpose and power in your prayer life by developing the seven habits of the heart.

Chapter 7: Teach Us to Pray: The Challenges of Prayer

Human nature thrives on challenges. In sports, we devise obstacles: the golf course has its mounds, the track its length, the tennis court its net, and so on. These human-imposed obstacles may make the games more frustrating, but they also make them more interesting and rewarding. Obstacles exist in prayer as well, though not all are human-imposed. They are also often frustrating; however, during these seasons, some of our greatest personal development can occur.

Some challenges are inherent in this adventure called prayer. Some examples are the reality of finite beings communicating with the infinite, supreme God and the complexities of experiencing intimacy with the invisible God. Additionally we must wrestle with philosophical questions: If God is all-knowing, what can I tell Him? If God desires to communicate with us, why then, is He not speaking? If God is sovereign, then does prayer change God's mind? Of all the questions people ask, one stands out as an ongoing challenge for many: If God is all powerful, then why are prayers not always answered? Christians sometimes face the test of unanswered prayer, and those who suffer most keenly are often those who sincerely believe that prayer moves mountains.

Other oppositions we face in prayer are brought about by our own actions. We can be too busy, too tired, too self-sufficient, or too lazy to pray. Sometimes our selfishly motivated shopping-list-prayers crowd out any chance to hear from God. Because we fail to invest the time and energy required for meaningful prayer, we quickly become bored and restless.

Such obstacles can face even the best of pray-ers. One of the masters of prayer, Teresa of Avila, admits to shaking the sand in her sixteenth-century hourglass to make her hour of prayer go faster.

This chapter examines some of the more common prayer challenges faced by Christians. First, we will consider obstacles of our own making. Then, we will ponder the question of unanswered prayer. Our goal will be to gain a fresh conviction regarding the power of prayer, the role it can potentially play in our lives, and a renewed determination to overcome our prayer challenges head-on.

Lesson 7.1 Prayer Busters: Overcoming Obstacles to Effective Prayer

Objectives

- 7.1.1 Identify and discuss five obstacles to effective prayer.*
- 7.1.2 Discuss reasons why you may become too busy to pray.*
- 7.1.3 Name something you can begin doing this week to reduce your busyness and establish a focused prayer time.*
- 7.1.4 Identify the ways your life may be characterized by too much noise.*
- 7.1.5 List something you can start now to cut down on the noise in your life.*
- 7.1.6 Evaluate how effectively you pray for the faith to stretch beyond your own talents, abilities, and resources.*

Lesson 7.2 The Challenge of Unanswered Prayer

Objective

- 7.2.1 Give scriptural support for sixteen possible reasons why prayer may not always appear to be answered.*

Lesson 7.3 The Blessing of Unanswered Prayer

Objective

- 7.3.1 Explain what is meant by “the blessing of unanswered prayer.”*

Lesson 7.1 Prayer Busters: Overcoming Obstacles to Effective Prayer

A sign along an Alaskan highway reads, “Choose your rut carefully. You will be in it for the next two hundred miles.” That is all too true. The ruts we allow ourselves to settle into have the potential to determine our path for quite some time. Is it possible that you have settled into a dry rut in your prayer life? Some Christians are in a rut of mechanically going through the motions, and the result can be boredom. For others, the rut does not even include prayer anymore. Has your time and communion with God become a thing of the past, a lost art, and a rejected relationship? While many factors can lead to this, the good news is that whatever your rut, you can get out of it. This section will highlight five common obstacles to prayer, all brought about by our own doing, which if allowed for too long, could result in our being stuck in a prayer rut that we need to get out of. “I do not have the time to pray” is one of the most common excuses for not praying. It seems to be a perfectly legitimate reason—not an excuse at all!

What are five humanly imposed obstacles to effective prayer?

Lesson Objective

Identify and discuss five obstacles to effective prayer.

As stated earlier, surveys reveal that the average Christian prays about two to three minutes per day—and much of this involves prayer before meals. How are we supposed to squeeze in an hour of prayer in the midst of jobs, errands, cleaning, church, school, and family? Why is it so easy to find ourselves stuck in the cycle of flash prayers, forcing them into the day in the name of productivity, or out of nothing other than sheer guilt? This trap is common because we are so busy that we do not choose prayer as a priority. “It is different today,” we try to assure ourselves. “In Bible times believers did not really have anything else to do. Perhaps God’s command to pray continually was not meant for people whose world includes fax machines,

cell phones, e-mail, and full-time work schedules.” But it *was* meant for us and for our own good.

1. Too Busy to Pray

Lesson Objectives

Discuss reasons why you may become too busy to pray.

The church in America has become a reflection of the culture—a thermometer instead of a thermostat. Because we have bought into much of society’s values, our lives have become fragmented and busy. Ironically, all our frantic efforts have not produced what we want: enough time. Many people live with a nagging feeling of never having enough daytime hours to get everything done. We have all seen people multi-tasking; while driving they also eat, drink, listen to the radio, shave or apply make-up, talk on the cell phone, or gesture at other drivers. Our busyness is inevitable—for the world’s values and priorities lead inevitably to the world’s pace. Patterson says it well, “the logic of secularization is busyness. We have made an idol of activity” (Patterson 2001, 37). For some of us, that activity is work; for others it is leisure. No matter what the specific focus of our busyness, because we are too busy, prayer has been pushed to the periphery. And when prayer is moved to the periphery of the church, it can only mean that God has too. Consequently, busyness is a great enemy to our prayer lives.

Being busy, of course, is not always bad. When kept in balance, it is good to be productive. The book of James states: “Faith, by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (2:17). “Jesus often had much to do, but he never did it in a way that severed the life-giving connection between him and his Father ... He observed a regular practice of withdrawing from activity for the sake of solitude and prayer” (Ortberg 2002, 79). Jesus was often busy, but never so busy that He no longer had time for the important things. Our busyness is out of balance when we are driven by a constant, pressing need to achieve or produce, when our activity becomes addictive, when we are unable to be still before God, when we cannot be content simply sitting at the Master’s feet, or when we cannot think of the last time we just sat and basked in God’s goodness.

Why Do We Allow Ourselves to Get too Busy?

Sometimes we try to hide behind our spiritual activity—after all, intimacy can be threatening. Getting close to Jesus means we can no longer hide our inadequacies. His light illuminates everything that is wrong and ugly about us. Unconsciously, therefore, we may flee God’s presence rather than pursue it. And Satan spurs on our retreat by telling us that we are okay because we are busy working for God. He gets us to believe that as long as we keep ourselves busy achieving for God and others, then we must be doing okay spiritually.

What does it mean to be an inward person and why is it important to our prayer lives?

Dr. James Houston, author of *Transforming Friendship*, discusses additional factors contributing to our busyness. He explains that busyness acts to repress our inner fears and personal anxieties, as we scramble to achieve an enviable image to display to others. We become outward people, obsessed with how we appear, rather than inward people, reflecting on the meaning of our lives. Behind much of the life’s rat-race is the unexamined assumption that what I do determines who I am. In this way, we define ourselves by what we do, rather than by any quality of what we are inside. It is typical at a party for one stranger to approach another with the question “What do you do?” Perhaps we would not have a clue how to reply to the deeper question, “Who are you?” (Houston 1989, 17). The world tells us that what we achieve and accomplish determines who we are, but the Bible teaches that who we are in Christ should be the basis for what we do. And this means that prayer must precede doing.

What Is the Impact of Busyness on Prayer?

Since prayer belongs to the relational side of human life, (to *who I am* rather than *what I do*), it is inevitable that prayer will have a very low priority, at the very best, for people who lead busy lives. Because our lives are full of things that need to be done, prayer gets pushed to the bottom of our agenda. Ironically, we set ourselves up, because believing we do not have enough time to pray actually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The

logic of the world's system is to make us occupied, overcommitted, and so full of blind activity that we become too busy—and too tired—to pray.

God's pace is different. He says to us, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). But even as He says this, He knows we will not act on it. He adds, "But you would have none of it." He mocks our solutions to our busyness: "You said, 'No we will flee on horses.' Therefore you will flee! You said, 'We will ride off on swift horses.' Therefore your pursuers will be swift" (Isaiah 30:15–16). "How do we try to solve our busyness? We get busier! God's judgment is to hand us over to the logic of our choices. The faster we run, the faster our anxieties will run. Until, perhaps, we fall exhausted and let God be God" (Patterson 2001, 37).

What are some steps a person can take to go from *doing* to *being*?

Suggestions for Going from Doing to Being

The time we give to prayer will be a true measure of its importance to us. A wise person recognizes that the busier he or she becomes, the more crucial prayer becomes, for without God's help and guidance, we will never be able to get it all done. We will make time for the things that truly are our highest priorities.

Lesson Objective

Name something you can begin doing this week to reduce your busyness and establish a focused prayer time.

So what can we do to reduce the drive that compels us to be too busy to pray? First, recognize that God loves you for who you are, not what you do. "Only one thing is needed" (Luke 10:42), and that is to spend time with Him. Out of this relationship (being) our work (doing) should flow. Second, reduce your need to get-it-done-yesterday and realize that there will always be tomorrow. This will keep us from putting off prayer in deference to more so-called productive activities. Third, develop patience. Practice waiting upon the Lord. Fourth, retrain yourself in how you think about prayer. Instead of seeing it as a waste of time when you have so many other things you need to be doing, recognize that it is the most important thing you could

be doing. Fifth, plan time in your schedule for non-productive free time just to relax in His presence and get away from the pressure to be producing. Finally, focus on the process of praying rather than on the outcome of being done so you can check it off your to-do list. Evaluate your success on the meaningfulness of the process.

2. Too Distracted to Pray

What changes do you need to make in your life to make time for prayer?

It happens all the time. We sit down to pray and the phone rings, the UPS truck shows up, the baby cries, the sprinkler system annoys us as water hits the window, and so on. Distractions cause our thoughts to scatter like dust, taking us in every direction but into the throne-room of prayer. “Against all mathematical odds, these interruptions seem to multiply during prayer times” (Yancey 2006, 184–186). These distractions—the external and internal noises of life—cause us to lose our ability to focus in prayer.

I Cannot Hear Myself Think—External Noise

The most obvious noise for us to recognize, of course, is the external noise. Have you ever stopped to listen to all the noises that flood our lives? Cell phones interrupt personal conversations; fax machines pierce the stillness of sleep, and pagers break the reverence of a church service. A wide range of electronic gadgets, alarms, and communication devices all clamor for our attention.

Lesson Objective

Identify the ways your life may be characterized by too much noise.

Add in the din produced by blaring car stereos, power lawn mowers, leaf blowers, sirens, televisions, Nintendo sets, and you have the beginnings of a sonic nightmare. I have not even mentioned the clamor of human voices, whether they belong to the man in the next booth, who is chattering too loudly on his cell phone or to your kids who are hollering over who gets to use the computer. (Roberts 2005, 52)

Clearly, we live in a noise-infested world.

Help! My Mind Is Running in a Million Directions—Internal Noise

What is internal noise and how can it negatively affect a person's prayer life?

As noisy as the world is, the world of our hearts can seem even louder. Martin Luther knew how distracting thoughts could be during prayer: “Let him who has not experienced this only try it. Resolve to pray earnestly, and no doubt you will see how large an assortment of your own thoughts will rush in on you and distract you, so that you cannot begin aright” (Yancey 2006, 184). We are stressed out, anxious about many things. Our thoughts rush from one deadline to the next. We dwell on the spat we had with our spouse this morning or on the criticism received yesterday at the office. We are worried about how we are going to pay the bills, write that paper, or help our teen through a tough period of transition. We are weighed down by the burden of all the projects and activities to which we have failed to say *no*. Our hearts become cluttered and we are distracted by our lack of simplicity.

Lesson Objective

List something you can start now to cut down on the noise in your life.

We often feel so harassed by the noisiness of our lives that we yearn for silence. As a mother of small children, I have lost count of the times I have thought to myself, *Oh what I would not give for just five minutes of peace and quiet!* Yet, amazingly, when I get my wish, I seem to do anything but actually enjoy quietly sitting at His feet. Instead, on those rare occasions when silence presents itself, most of the time I find a way to disturb the peace. I quickly turn on the television or my iPod, make that needed phone call, or find something on my to-do list to get done—anything but savor the quiet moments with Him I so deeply need. We do this because we are not centered in our hearts.

Be Still and Know that I Am God

The onslaught of internal and external noise has the tendency to choke out prayer. Even when we try to pray, the competing noises often drown out the still small voice of God. Consequently, we must become intentional about escaping not just from the acoustic din in which we live, but from the psychic commotion that wears down our souls. We desperately need to discover how to enjoy true, restful stillness—to be able to respond to the Lord’s invitation: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). I long to echo the psalmist: “I have stilled and quieted my soul” (Psalm 131:2).

Why do we need such quiet moments? “Because silence is an avenue to being with God, a relational dynamic in which we actually enjoy God’s presence. Because quiet is a prerequisite to hearing God” (Roberts 2005, 52). How can we expect to hear His voice if we have filled our ears and our hearts with distractions? We will miss the whisper of His “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12, KJV) if our hearts are not quiet.

What steps can a person take to slow down the distractions to focus on prayer?

Suggestions for Going from Buzzing to Being

If you wish to reduce the barrage of distractions, the clamoring noises that challenge your prayer life, you will have to become intentional about it. Author Philip Yancey, in this book *Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference?*, offers a few practical suggestions to help us deal with distractions. First, suppress possible interruptions from electronic devices. Go to a “digital free zone” (leave your cell phone, pager, iPod, and computer behind) and let the answering machine, voicemail, or personal assistant take phone messages.

Second, keep a journal available to jot down distracting thoughts. As soon as a thought enters your mind—*I forgot to call the repairman about that leaky roof*—write it down and take care of it later. Capture the thought and keep it from nagging you.

Third, incorporate distractions into your praying. If I keep stewing because of something a coworker said to me, I pray about it. If I keep worrying about how I am going to meet a coming deadline, I pray about it. If I am nursing hurt feelings about something my husband said, I pray about it. In my prayer I will reflect on my responses to those individuals, examine my motives, and try to learn from the criticisms. In many cases, the distractions become my prayer. When I am with my husband or a close friend, I naturally talk about whatever is on my mind rather than follow a formal agenda; we should do the same with God.

Fourth, determine whether you are praying for things that really matter to you. British theologian Herbert McCabe said:

People often complain of “distractions” during prayer. Their mind goes wandering off onto other things. This is nearly always due to praying for something you do not really much want; you just think it would be proper and respectable and religious to want it. So you pray high-mindedly for big but distant things like peace in Northern Ireland or you pray that your aunt will get better from the flu—when in fact you do not much care about these things; perhaps you ought to, but you don’t. And so your prayer is rapidly invaded by distractions arising from what you really do want—a promotion at work, let us say. Distractions are nearly always your real wants breaking in on your prayer for edifying, but bogus, wants. If you are distracted, trace your distraction back to the real desires it comes from and pray about these. (Yancey 2006, 187–188)

When you are praying for what really matters to you, you will be less likely to be distracted. People on sinking ships usually do not complain of distractions during their prayer.

3. Too Lazy to Pray

The Hard Work of Prayer

Evaluate how effectively you pray for the faith to stretch beyond your own talents, abilities and resources.

Another reason many Christians fail to pray is that they are simply too lazy; they lack the discipline. Missionary and prayer warrior Mary Slessor said, “Praying is harder work than ‘doing.’ ” This is why Eugene Peterson says that the person who claims to be too busy to pray is really a lazy person. In busyness, he or she is procrastinating, avoiding the real work of prayer.

There is absolutely no substitute for the hard work of prayer. How easy it is to let the prayer time slip by, to make excuses, even seemingly legitimate ones. We must allow the Spirit of God to burn in our hearts this mystery:

The most important work we have to do is that which must be done on our knees, alone with God, away from the hustle of the world. Prayer is that unique power which makes weak people the very channels of God to change the world. It is the great prerequisite and parallel necessity to all kingdom effort. (Demaray 1985, 130)

What biblical examples show a person wrestling with God?

Wrestling with God

When we consider many of the prayers recorded in Scripture, it was nothing short of hard work. Our prayers tend to be so polite, yet in Scripture, for those who really took prayer seriously, prayer was intense, and often turned into a sort of wrestling match with God. The Bible is full of people who went toe-to-toe with God—Abraham, Moses, Job, Jacob, David, and Habakkuk to name a few. Remember the story of Jacob? He wrestled with the angel of the Lord, and he fought as if his life depended on it. All night the two wrestled, neither gaining the advantage, until at last the first gleam of daybreak brightened the horizon. “Let me go” the angel declared. “I will not let you go, not until you bless me.” At that moment, God tenderly bestows on Jacob a new name, Israel, which means “God-wrestler.” Yancey quotes a prayer legend, E.M. Bounds: “ ‘Prayer in its highest form and grandest success assumes the attitude of a wrestler with God.’ Our no-holds barred outbursts hardly threaten God, and sometimes they even seem to change God” (Yancey 2006, 100).

Yancey contemplates the rants of Job. His three friends speak in clichés and pious formulas, using the reserved language often heard in public prayers at church. They defend God, try to soothe Job’s outburst, and reason their way to accepting the world as it is. Job will have none of it. He bitterly objects to being the victim of a cruel God. Job speaks to God directly from the heart—a deeply wounded heart. He nearly abandons praying, yet in the ironic twist at the end of Job, God comes down squarely on the side of Job’s bare-all approach, dismissing the friends’ words with a blast of contempt (Yancey 2006, 95).

Are you ready to get down to business with God? If so, roll up your sleeves and get ready for a workout. It will involve hard work, but it will pay off with rich rewards.

4. Too Disappointed with God to Pray

Death of a Pray-er

Some Christians do not pray because deep down they doubt that anything will happen. For many people, previously unanswered prayers form a barrier that blocks their desire to talk with God. They think, “What kind of God—who has the power to save a life or heal a disease—would sit on the sidelines despite my urgent pleas for help?”

What is the secret of victorious praying?

In the face of unanswered prayer, many Christians throw in the towel altogether on prayer. They still go to church, bow their heads at prayer time, and say grace before meals; but they no longer engage in earnest, soul-searching prayer that believes God to move mountains. The great danger is not that we will renounce prayer altogether, but settle for a powerless version of it.

We may be tempted to go in this direction, but we dare not give in. We must continue to hold the conviction that God is God; that He does all things well, and that He is infinite in knowledge. God is good and kind, and what He has done is for our larger benefit, even if we cannot see that right now. Sometimes He wants to do something even better than what we prayed for originally. Such was the case with Mary and Martha. It likely had

not occurred to them that their brother would be raised from the dead and that their lives would be thereby greatly enriched, and God would be glorified more.

In the face of unanswered prayer, Christians with deep prayer roots, pray anyway, because they understand that God can use the situation for His glory. This is the real secret of victorious praying.

He Never Promised You a Rose Garden

When we are prone to resent God for not relieving the suffering in our lives, we may need to ensure we have realistic expectations regarding the nature of the Christian life. Contrary to the message declared by some, when we become Christians God does not promise us a life free from problems. We have no biblical basis for such a notion. On the contrary, the Scriptures indicate numerous conflicts that the Christian will face. Jesus himself was a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering (Isaiah 53:3). And His disciples followed in the footsteps of His suffering.

What is the danger of believing that God intends a trouble-free life for Christians?

Many Christians mistakenly believe (consciously or subconsciously) that God intends a trouble-free life for them. Hence, the following:

They conclude that anything painful and upsetting (illness, accident, injury, loss of job, the suffering of a loved one) indicates either that God's wisdom, or power, or both have broken down and cannot be trusted. This idea of God's intention is a complete mistake. God never pledged to give us a happy, comfortable, trouble-free life. (Packer 1993, 81)

Yet many Christians operate as if the highest good in life is their personal comfort—they desire to be spared from anything uncomfortable. Pastor Bill Hybels reflects on his discovery of this false assumption in his own life:

What can we learn about Christians and conflict from the life of Jesus?

There was grand confusion between wants and needs, rights and favors, justice and grace, convenience and conformity to Christ. I found that I'd been praying, in effect, "Keep me from trial or tragedy or pain or anything that would make me really grow and become a man of God. Just give me a convenient, happy, satisfying, problem-free life." (Hybels 1998, 106)

When Jesus prayed the model prayer we call the Lord's Prayer, His first requests were that God's name be revered, that His kingdom come, and that His will be done. So too, our heart's cry should not be for a life of pain-free ease, but to glorify God.

5. Too Self-Sufficient to Pray

For many years I have taught a course in basic Christian formation at a Christian university. While studying the unit on prayer, the students and I often have a brainstorming session on the factors contributing to prayerlessness in the church. Without fail, one of the first answers given is, in effect, "I do not feel an urgency to pray because there is not really anything I need in my life." We live in such an affluent culture that we are fully capable of coming up with everything we need to survive. The result over time, however, is the development of a subtle—but consistent—dependence upon self.

What characteristic of the Laodicean church does today's Western church exhibit?

The Western church can be characterized by a false sense of self-sufficiency that resembles that of the Laodicean church in Revelation. The Laodiceans said of themselves: "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But Jesus had a different opinion of them: "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." Even worse, He saw himself as standing outside the church, not inside; knocking on the door, asking to be let in. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him,

and he with me” (Revelation 3:14–22). “To pray would be to open the door. But our sense of self-sufficiency paralyzes the hand that would turn the knob” (Patterson 2001, 159).

What can Christians do to overcome a false sense of self-sufficiency?

We must see beyond what we are capable of doing (self-sufficiency) to what God is capable of doing. If our faith in God cannot believe Him for something bigger than ourselves, then our faith is no longer in Him but in ourselves and our religious activity. As we discussed in Chapter 3, God’s mission for our life is bigger than anything we could do on our own. God calls us to partner with Him in God-sized tasks. As we expect great things from God we should attempt great things for Him that will require us to step out in faith and force us to earnest prayer. Is there a challenge in your life so large that you have no hope of doing it apart from God’s help? If not, consider the possibility that you are seriously under-challenged. Ask Him for something only He can do and watch what happens.

One of the greatest dangers we face is not that we stop praying altogether, but that we become so distracted and rushed and disillusioned that we will settle for a powerless version of prayer. Are you stuck in a prayer rut of your own making? If so, what is hindering your prayer life from becoming all that it can be? Address it before you travel another two hundred miles in the same rut.

Lesson 7.2 The Challenge of Unanswered Prayer

We have here reconfirmed our belief in the power of prayer. We have absolutely witnessed incredible answers to prayer in our own lives, as well as in the lives of others. Nevertheless, every time I hear of a woman who has been given a baby in answer to prayer, I cannot help think about my close friend who has prayed for nearly twenty years to have a baby. She is praying just as fervently as I did, if not more so. While I rejoice over the reports of miraculous answers to prayer, I also remember with a pang the stories of those who have not yet received their answer. “I do not doubt that God

answers prayer. Rather, I struggle with the inconsistency of those apparent answers” (Yancey 2006, 220).

The many accounts of answered prayer do not solve the problem of unanswered prayer. For example, we rejoice in the testimony of the man who cried out to God and was miraculously spared from death in the Twin Towers on September eleventh. But what about the three thousand who died, many of whom were also praying even as the building imploded on them? This is where we find Mary and Martha. They fully believed in God’s ability to heal. That is why they had sent for Jesus, informing Him of Lazarus’ illness. But while they waited for the answer, their brother died. They struggled with Jesus’ lack of response: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). What had happened? Why did Jesus not answer their prayers?

Possible Reasons Prayer May Not Be Answered

Why would the all-loving, all-powerful God deny valid requests from faithful believers? The question deserves consideration: why are all prayers not answered? It should be pointed out that in reality, no prayer goes unanswered. The Lord either says yes, no, or wait—and often when we say God has not answered our prayer, we are saying that He has not answered in the manner for which we were hoping. This section really addresses those situations in which God seems to be answering with “no” or “wait.”

Lesson Objective

Give scriptural support for sixteen possible reasons why prayer may not always appear to be answered.

We must first acknowledge that we will likely never know all the reasons for unanswered prayer. Sometimes the reasons for God’s apparent silence are a mystery. The Bible does give many clues as to why God may appear to be silent in response to our petitions. A biblical examination reveals several possible factors contributing to unanswered prayer. The following paragraphs will consider 16 of the possible reasons offered in Scripture.

1. Unconfessed Sin, or Disobedience (See Exodus 23:25; Numbers 12:10; Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 28:13; Isaiah 1:15–16; 59:2; John 15:7; James 5:16; 1 John 3:21–22)

What is the significance of praying in faith?

When our prayers go unanswered, some Christians attribute blame to God. However, at some point we should ask, “Could it be that the problem resides within ourselves—that sin has cut off our communication with the Father? Scripture states: “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me” (Psalm 66:18). Also, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2). We cannot live however we want and assume we can enjoy open communication with God.

If you are tolerating sin in your life, do not waste your breath praying unless it is a prayer of confession. “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Receive the Lord’s forgiveness, and then He will listen when you call out to Him.

2. Lack of Faith (Matthew 17:20; 13:58; 15:21–28; Mark 6:5–6; 9:23; 11:22–24; James 1:5–7; 5:15)

Sometimes prayer may not be answered due to a lack of faith on the part of the person praying, or on the part of the person for whom prayer is being offered. Christ’s disciples, although divinely commissioned to cast out devils and to heal the sick, on one occasion failed to deliver an epileptic boy. When Jesus came down from the mountain, He delivered the boy and rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith (Matthew 17:20). On another occasion, when Jesus traveled to His hometown of Nazareth, “He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith” (Matthew 13:58).

When we ask something of God, we must ask in faith. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him” (Mark 11:23). Praying in faith means that we are more than simply open to the possibility that God is able to answer our prayers. If a non-Christian died while he or she was open to the possibility that Jesus had died on the Cross for his or her sins, that person would still go to hell. It is not being open that gets answers from God; but believing to the point of pursuing what He has promised. “Everything is possible for him who believes” (Mark 9:23).

Thankfully, each of us can have true faith. I have heard some Christians say, “I do not have the gift of faith.” They incorrectly assume that faith is merely a gift that a person either has or lacks, rather than something that can be developed by exercise, like a muscle. As long as we have the faith of a tiny mustard seed, we can exercise that faith by engaging with God in prayer.

How can you boost your faith?

To boost your faith, go to Scripture and remind yourself of what God has done for His people. Review His works in the lives of others throughout history. Finally, remind yourselves of the ways He has worked in your own life. This is one reason why it is good to build *altars* or ways of remembering God’s goodness. I know one family who writes the answered prayer on a large stone and places it in a rock garden in their backyard. Your altar could be a journal of your prayer requests; you could log answers as they come and review them periodically. Focus your mind accordingly, so that when you pray it will be to the God who is able. Anticipate seeing mighty demonstrations of God’s power.

3. Violating the Laws of Nature (Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19–20; Galatians 6:7)

When God created the world, He set in motion certain laws of nature, laws that He designed to govern the universe. Christians are mortal beings subject to these laws the same as anyone else. If Christians abuse their bodies or fail to take proper care of them, they cannot assume that God will honor their prayer for exceptions to the rule. For example, a person cannot continually overeat, fail to get the rest the body demands, and then expect God to make an exception and keep them strong and healthy. It is useless to seek healing for lung cancer if one is not willing to give up a habit of chain smoking.

4. Appointed Time to Die (Ecclesiastes 3:2; Romans 5:12; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Hebrews 9:27)

While God’s ability to answer prayer will never be limited by a person’s age, healing was never intended as a mere prolongation of life, apart from

spiritual considerations. The Bible teaches this: “There is a time to die” (Ecclesiastes 3:2; Hebrews 9:27). God has spoken it, and barring the rapture of the believers first, every person will keep that appointment.

Unfortunately, contemporary society finds it difficult to accept its mortality—yet the mortality rate of every generation is 100 percent. Even the people who received healing from Jesus eventually died. Many Christians act like they believe there should be no limitations to their lives. However, Christians are subject to the effects of the Fall just like every human being. If this were not God’s intent, then every believer who ever lived would still be living today. If it is a person’s time to die, then we should be willing to release that person to God. For Christians, physical death leads to ultimate healing. “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

5. Lack of Social Concern (Proverbs 21:13; Isaiah 58:3–9; Malachi 3:5, 16)

Why is it important for a Christian to be concerned with social issues?

The Bible warns that a lack of social concern—for the poor, orphans, and widows—has a direct bearing on how our prayers are received. Proverbs 21:13 bluntly declares, “If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.” On one occasion, the Israelites were wondering why God was not answering their prayers. They had even fasted and humbled themselves—and He still did not listen. Here is what He told them through His prophet Isaiah:

On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high ... Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ... Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. (58:3–9)

God is committed to developing a people who will reflect His character in this world, and His character always expresses concern and compassion for the afflicted. These warnings are a strong indictment to the Western church today. It may seem strange that issues such as social concern have a direct impact on our prayer lives, but Yancey explains how every aspect of life, including how we treat those around us, affects an intimate relationship.

I cannot say to my neighbor, “I love you and enjoy spending time with you, but I hate your stupid dog and keep those bratty kids out of my yard, will you?” How I treat what belongs to my neighbor affects how he receives my love. The same applies to God. How I treat God’s children will determine in part how God receives my prayers and my worship. Prayer involves more than bowing my head a few times a day; it pervades all of life and vice versa. John summed it up, “We receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:22). If you are asking, “Why does God not answer my prayers the way He answers that person’s prayers?” you should really be asking, “Why is it that I have not lived the kind of life that person has lived?” (Yancey 2006, 224–25)

6. Poor Domestic and Social Relationships (2 Kings 20:3–5; Job 42:10; Malachi 2:13–16; Galatians 4:19; 1 Corinthians 11:29–30; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 John 2:9; Revelation 3:16)

Poor domestic relationships can be another hindrance to effective prayer. Peter stresses the importance of husbands and wives keeping their relationships in good order “so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Peter 3:7). Likewise, Malachi states that those who break marriage vows through adultery and divorce risk God closing His ears to their prayers (Malachi 2:13–14).

God’s concern extends beyond the marriage union, to relationships in general. Most believers underestimate how committed God is to building and maintaining authentic Christian community. He wants us to carry our relationship with Him into our relationships with others. If we do good to our brothers and sisters, it is like doing good to Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31–46). There is no point in trying to pray if we are engaged in ongoing conflict with a family member, friend, co-worker, or a neighbor. “Anyone

who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness” (1 John 2:9). A key indication of this is the unwillingness to forgive (Matthew 6:14; 5:23–24). Since Christians are meant to live in a community of love, some prayers will not be answered until poor relationships are restored.

Of course it is not always possible to make amends. The other party may have passed away, or may not desire to be reconciled. Romans 12:18 says: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

If you find yourself in this situation, examine your heart. Have you sincerely tried to restore the relationship, or are you holding something back? Do you really want restoration, or are you only doing it because you have to? If your attempts have been wholehearted and honest, God will not let the broken relationship stand in the way of your prayers. (Hybels 1998, 105)

7. Lack of Prayer and Fasting (Matthew 15:28; Mark 9:29; 11:23–24; Luke 11:1–13; Hebrews 11:6)

The lack of fervent prayer and fasting is also a hindrance to our seeing prayers answered. The disciples had prayed for healing for a boy with a mute spirit, but he had not been healed. But when Jesus came, He cast out the evil spirit and the boy was healed. Later, when they were alone with the Lord, the disciples asked why they had not been successful. They had been given power to cast out demons and had successfully done so before this. Jesus told them: “ ‘This kind can come out only by prayer’ ” (Mark 9:29).

This is referring to bold, persistent prayer. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16). God rewards those who *earnestly* seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). In Luke 11:1–13, Jesus told a parable to teach the disciples the importance of boldness and persistence in prayer and to assure them that God answers prayer. Mark 11:23–24 shows a pattern of prayer: we are to ask in bold confidence that God will give us whatever we ask. We should pray until an answer is received. Those who pray six times fervently and stop there, when they ought to have prayed seven times (2 Kings 13:18–19), deprive themselves of their answer. Matthew 15:21–28 tells the story of the Canaanite woman who begged Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Repeatedly she sought healing from Him, and finally His response was, “Woman, you have great faith! Your

request is granted” (Matthew 15:28). We can boldly enter the throne of grace, fervently seeking God to work on our behalf.

8. It May Be Divine Punishment (Leviticus 26:14–16; Deuteronomy 28:15, 21; Psalm 119:6–7; Proverbs 3:11–12; Hebrews 12:6, 10–11)

Why does God punish His people?

Throughout Scripture, we see that corrective measures are sometimes necessary for the child of God. Such discipline is a token of God’s love. “The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Hebrews 12:6). Hebrews provides tender teaching about chastisement in the form of bodily affliction as well as in other kinds of suffering.

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:10–11)

Unanswered prayer will be worthwhile if by it we receive divine instruction through which we actually make the necessary spiritual adjustment to become more like Christ. A word of caution should be noted however. While the concept of God responding in a personal way to the sins of men and women is portrayed in Scripture, we can never determine whether someone else’s suffering is a result of God’s personal punishment. Every person has sinned, and this makes it difficult to know for certain if someone is suffering as a result of personal divine punishment. A good rule to follow is to assume that all suffering is the result of living in a fallen world, unless a person is unusually and clearly impressed that God is personally punishing him or her.

9. Prayerlessness (James 4:2)

Is it possible that you want something so badly you simply assume God knows your prayer without ever having actually prayed it? “You do not have because you do not ask God” (James 4:2). James assumes that we will receive as long as we ask God. If we look to God in faith, He does answer

prayer. But we cannot expect from God if we are not spending time with Him and seeking His word in our lives. We have no right to complain about our situation if we are not making it a matter of prayer.

Be honest: how often does something like this happen? You decide to pray about something. You add it to your prayer list and even tell a friend that you are praying about it, and you almost do. But even though you think about it from time-to-time, go to a counselor to talk about it, read self-help books to help you address it, or confide in Christian friends about it, you hardly ever actually pray about it. Why does God not answer your prayer? Maybe it is because you have not prayed about it purposefully, fervently, expectantly, or regularly over an extended period of time.

10. Refusal to Accept Medicine as God's Means of Healing (Matthew 9:12; Colossians 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:23)

Some people may never receive healing from God simply because they refuse to accept the means of healing that He has made available to them. Jesus himself stated that the sick need a physician (Matthew 9:12). Physicians and medicine are the instruments that God often uses to bring about healing. When Timothy had a stomach problem, Paul's counsel to him was to take a little wine for his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul would have undoubtedly intended this advice for medicinal purposes. It should be noted that the Holy Spirit called Luke the "beloved doctor" (Colossians 4:14), rather than "a former doctor."

11. Not Praying in the Will of God (Luke 1:20; 2 Samuel 12:14–18; James 5:15; 1 John. 5:14)

Another possible hindrance to our prayers is not praying in the will of God. John says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). However vigorous our faith, it does not guarantee an immediate answer to prayer if the prayer is not in accordance with God's will. All the faith in the world would not heal Zechariah. The angel Gabriel had told him, "You will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens" (Luke 1:20). Nothing could save David's son by the wife of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:14–18). Not until

God's time had come for the birth of Isaac could Sarah be healed, even though all the faith of Abraham was added to hers (Hebrews 11:11).

Jesus said, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23), yet in the garden He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Matthew 26:39). Surely Jesus believed it was possible for God to remove His cup, so then why did he say, " 'If it is possible' "? Because the promise "Everything is possible for him who believes" is conditioned on the will of God. To make this clear, Jesus ended His prayer, " 'Yet not as I will, but as you will.' "

Taking these examples into consideration, it can only be appropriate to include the phrase "if it be Your will" in our prayers. The prayer offered in faith is always subject to the will of God.

12. Improper Motives (John 5:14; James 4:3; 1 John 5:14)

Our prayers may go unanswered because our motivations are wrong. One common, improper motive is selfishness—wanting something for our own personal pleasure. James says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3). The term for "wrong" (*kakos*) means diseased, sick, or evil. In what way was their motive sick? They were only interested in their own "pleasures" (*hedonism*), referring to those pleasures that are at war with our souls. It is not that God does not want people to have pleasure, but that He wants to train them to take pleasure in what He knows is truly good. We cannot view prayer as having a magical genie in a bottle, a self-serving way of getting whatever our latest whim desires.

Another common, improper motive involves the attempt to shift personal responsibility. For example, if someone is praying for a problem relationship, it is not uncommon to hear them pray, "God, please change the other person." Wives pray this about husbands, husbands about wives, parents about children, employees about bosses, and so on. However, it is often perfectly appropriate to pray that someone will change. After all, that is what we do when we pray for conversions, for hearts to be softened, or for bad habits or addictions to be broken. But too often the motive behind such a request is not an authentic concern for the other person—it often stems from selfish motivations. A more realistic interpretation of the

prayer might be, “I do not want to face my own shortcomings. I do not want to work on this relationship. I do not want to have to change at all. Instead, I want the other person to accommodate all my personal needs, so I am asking you to change him or her.” If you pray that kind of prayer, God may say *no* (Hybels 1998, 77).

It should be noted that it is possible to have wrong motives behind prayers for legitimate requests, things for which it is completely proper to ask God. For example, a pastor may be praying for revival. This is certainly in line with God’s will. But what if the pastor’s prayers for revival arose from purely selfish motives? The pastor may desire revival so that the membership may be increased, so that the church may have more power and influence in the community, or so that the church treasury may be filled. Possibly the pastor harbors ambitions to become a leader within the Movement and wants to be able to share a good report at the upcoming district council. It should not be surprising if God does not honor such prayers. “We should be praying for revival because we cannot endure the dishonor of God caused by worldliness in the church, the sins of unbelievers, and the proud unbelief of the day. We should pray for revival so that God may be glorified by the outpouring of His Spirit on the Church of Christ” (Torrey 1985, 64).

So, we can make requests of God and expect answers, as long as we have the right motives. Stop and reexamine the motive behind your prayer.

13. The Prayer Was Inappropriate (Matthew 17:1–8; 20:20–23; Mark 9:2–8; 10:35–40; Luke 9:28–36, 51–56)

Sometimes prayers go unanswered because they are inappropriate. Jesus’ disciples were not immune from making misguided petitions—not even the three who were closest to Him. For instance, the mother of James and John requested that they receive the two best seats in the Kingdom. Jesus knew that their request was inappropriate, and in effect told them that He would not grant it (Matthew 20:20–23). When Jesus and the disciples were denied a travel permit through a Samaritan village, it irritated James and John so much that they asked Jesus to destroy the village with fire from heaven. Once again, Jesus denied their request. In fact, He rebuked them for making it (Luke 9:51–56). “If Jesus’ closest

disciples were capable of making short-sighted, self-serving, and immature requests, then we are too” (Hybels 1998, 75).

Some prayer requests, no matter how well intentioned, are simply inappropriate. They could be self-serving, frivolous, or not in accord with God’s nature. They put the focus on our agenda, rather than on the things of God. A last-ditch plea for an “A” on the test will likely not succeed if the student has not studied. Prison chaplains have reported hearing criminals confess that the only time they prayed was when they felt they were in danger of getting caught.

Many Christians are quick to quote this passage:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you ... If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:7–11)

But “it is God’s prerogative to give good things, things that we have need of, and if in our limited earthly perspective we ask for things that do not come under these headings God, like human parents, reserves the right to say ‘No, not that; it would not be good for you—but accept this instead’ ” (Packer 1993, 192). God never ignores what we are saying; often He gives us what we should have asked for, rather than what we actually requested.

Fortunately, our God loves us too much to say *yes* to inappropriate requests. We may fool ourselves into thinking selfish requests are appropriate, but we cannot fool God. He knows when our motives are destructive, and He often protects us from them by saying *no*.

What four questions can a person ask to keep from making an inappropriate request before God?

Before bringing a request to the Lord, we would do well to ask ourselves four questions: (1) Would it bring glory to God? (2) Would it advance His kingdom? (3) Would it help people? and (4) Would it help me to grow spiritually? May our prayer be, “Lord, help me present requests that are in line with your will.”

14. The timing may not be right (Psalm 103:3; 6:2–3; 41:3; Matthew 25:36; Hebrews 11:32–34)

Sometimes what we are praying for is in God's will, but the timing is not quite right, and God responds with the words, "not yet." God promised to sustain David on his sickbed and "restore him from his bed of illness" (Psalm 41:3). This gently suggests the possibility of delay. The answer to prayer is not always immediate.

Many parents know that children rank the words *not yet* as nearly the worst in the English language, second only to the word *no*. When my children were young, they would begin asking in January, "Is it almost Christmas time again?" "Not yet," was the answer. "It is taking forever!" I, too, can remember exclaiming to my mother, "All fifth-grade girls wear make-up and nylons; may I?" How I hated to hear her *not yet*. And nearly every family has had the experience of leaving on a five-hundred-mile car trip; then fifteen miles from home, as you slow down for a tollbooth, voices from the back seat ask, "Are we there yet?" "Not yet" you say, and the groans and complaints begin. There is an impatient child in all of us, a child who wants God to meet every need and grant every request right now. When our all-knowing and all-wise Heavenly Father deems it best to say, "No yet," we get frustrated with Him and the groaning and complaining begin.

Why does God sometimes hold off in answering our prayers? Pastor Bill Hybels suggests several reasons. Sometimes God delays in order to test our faith. Do we think of Him as a celestial vending machine that we should kick if we do not get an instant response? Or do we relate to Him as a loving Father Who will give us what we need when we need it? Can we trust Him even if we do not see immediate results? Sometimes God delays so that we can modify our requests. Over time we may see that the original request was not legitimate. As we understand the situation better and strive to see the situation from an eternal perspective, we may want to make it more in line with God's will. Sometimes God delays so that we can develop character qualities such as endurance, trust, patience or submission—qualities that come only when we wait patiently and trust in His timing. Spiritual gains can come through pain, hurt, struggle, confusion, and disappointment. If we had our way though, how long would any of us put up with these character builders without asking God to remove them? We may not be able to see the reasons for the delay, but that is not unusual. As God says through Isaiah the prophet, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither

are your ways my ways ... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9) (Hybels 1998, 81–82).

Wrestling with unanswered pray may cause our faith to grow in ways it never would grow otherwise. It can drive us to search our hearts, examine our faith, and consider deeply our relationship with God.

15. The Kingdom Has Not Arrived in its Ultimate Fullness (Romans 8:19–24; 1 Corinthians 15:52)

Only in the final state of the Kingdom has God promised to remove all disease and physical incapacity. We must remember that despite the victory that Christ has achieved over Satan, everything is not yet submitted to God. The enemy is still active. His years are counted, and his end is sure. But in the meantime, he remains the prince of this world, causes much suffering, and often seems to have the upper hand. However, God will have the final say, and He will assert His universal sovereignty in salvation and judgment at Christ’s second coming. Because of this ultimate victory, Christians have the assurance that those very prayers that remained unanswered in this life will have spectacular vindication in eternity. Revelation 21:4 promises that God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Hybels 1998, 79–80). Hebrews 11:32–34 enumerates people who experienced victory through deliverance, but verses 35–38 mention another group of those who were tortured, afflicted, tormented, and slain. To one group victory was apparent. To the other group deliverance did not come in this life, except through death. On the resurrection side both were victorious.

Many claim that if healing is provided for in the atonement, then a person should be healed as readily as he or she is saved. The strength of this argument rests on the validity of the assumption that salvation in all its fullness is completed at conversion. But is this true? Is the whole of the sin question settled immediately? It could be; the resources are adequate.

In the atonement is provision for deliverance from a gossiping tongue, a bad temper, a malicious spirit, evil speaking, in fact, from every sin, but who can claim to have received such a full deliverance? Despite the

provision, our nature has not yet been made perfect. If one finds it difficult to appropriate the entire provision for the soul, is it surprising that one finds it difficult to appropriate the entire provision for the body? ... Although the provision for victory over death is in the atonement, it cannot become our experience until the resurrection. For this reason, the provision for perfect health cannot be received until the resurrection either ... The full provision for the body and soul is not granted until the kingdom comes in its final ultimate glory. (Wright 1984, 58)

Presently, we can live in anticipation of the fullness of the kingdom of God, yet we also have a down payment for the coming ultimate redemption and healing. We can look forward to the time when “we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:52–53).

16. Sovereignty of God (John 5:1–15; Isaiah 55:9; Mark 9:23; Matthew 26:39)

In the final analysis, we may have no other possible explanation than the fact that God is sovereign, and He knows best. We must accept this answer. We can search the Scriptures from beginning to end, and pray from morning to night, but we cannot afford to come to a place of unhealthy obsession. This can lead to a fruitless end; God can grow dim and the heart cold.

God chooses, at times, not to give any reason at all for why He does not answer prayer. When Jesus was at the pool of Bethesda, He healed only one paralytic (John 5:1–15), even though there were sick people lying all around the pool. We not told why it was the Father’s will to heal only that person. But God is sovereign; He does not have to explain himself to anyone.

As finite creatures, we are incapable of understanding all the ways of God. Mystery is a central characteristic of the spiritual life. Because we are human, there are limits to our understanding. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. We cannot discern the long-term, even eternal ramifications of our requests.

We cannot understand the intricate web of relationships and events that may be blocking the answer we desire. We cannot discern how a delay in

answering our prayers may actually be preparing us for a much greater manifestation of God's grace and power. In short, we have to trust God and observe life from the eternal perspective. (Rumford 2000, 32)

Ultimately, we must come to a place of submission, humbly acknowledging that God is sovereign and that however baffled we are by the circumstances, He is in control. Such a humbling of spirit leads to a greater trust in the love and wisdom of God as well as to deeper understanding of His sovereignty.

The Bible teaches that many obstacles can hinder our prayers. This is not to say that God only answers prayer when the conditions are perfect. He is God and can do anything at any time. No one can limit the work of the Holy Spirit, and divine answer to prayer has certainly occurred in some unlikely cases. However, our prayers may go unanswered for a number of reasons. If you have been praying diligently about a matter and it seems as if God has stopped talking, maybe you need to reexamine your request. Maybe your request stems from self-serving motivations, or is simply inappropriate; maybe there is an unwillingness on your part to face the real issue; maybe the answer to your prayer would be destructive in ways you do not understand. Maybe it is short-sighted or too small. Maybe God has something better in mind!

When we do not see an immediate response to our prayers, we should be diligent. We must offer our prayers with humility that conveys confidence in His ability, yet resignation to His sovereignty. We must continue to believe without attempting to manipulate God, always respecting the mystery surrounding prayer.

Lesson 7.3 The Blessing of Unanswered Prayer

We should not jump to the conclusion that unanswered prayer is always a bad thing. The movie *Bruce Almighty* portrays Hollywood's version of what might happen if God were to answer *yes* to every human prayer. The lead character rages against God after a series of mishaps. "He could fix my life in five minutes if He wanted to," he complains. So God decides to let him try being God for a week to see if he can improve matters. The man uses his divine power selfishly, like a magic genie he can command to get whatever

he pleases, no matter how trivial. He hears thousands of prayers in his head at once, and tries to deal with the blizzard of pleas by answering *yes* to everyone who prays. However, when he answers *yes* to everyone praying to win the lottery, 400,000 winners were created, diluting the grand prize to almost nothing. He lassos the moon to bring it closer while trying to create a romantic mood for his girlfriend, resulting in a tidal wave in Japan. He quickly gains an appreciation for the complexity of prayer as well as a new humility and sense of inadequacy. It was not as simple as merely deciding to say *yes* to every request.

Lesson Objective

Explain what is meant by “the blessing of unanswered prayer.”

Why is it good that God does not answer all prayers affirmatively?

By answering every possible prayer in the manner we request, God would in effect be turning the world over to us to run.

History shows how we have handled the limited power granted us: we have fought wars, committed genocide, fouled the air and water, destroyed forests, established unjust political systems, concentrated pockets of superfluous wealth and grinding poverty. What if God gave us automatic access to supernatural power? What further havoc might we wreak? (Yancey 2006, 228)

The Efficacy of Prayer

Even if all the things that people prayed for happened—which they do not—this would not prove what Christians mean by the efficacy of prayer. For prayer is request. The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them.

Invariable “success” in prayer would not prove the Christian doctrine at all. It would prove something more like magic—a power in certain human beings to control, or compel, the course of nature.

—C.S. Lewis quoted in Hayford 2001. 203

Hindsight often has perfect vision. Often, we can see in retrospect that for our sakes, some prayers are better left unanswered. As a child, Amy Carmichael used to pray for God to change her eyes from brown to blue. Later, as a missionary in India, she was grateful for her brown eyes, which made her less foreign and intimidating to Indian children.

More than one young person has prayed to marry a certain someone only to find that this prayer went unanswered. Yet, after several years, it became clear to the youth that his or her infatuation would not have been a wise choice as a lifetime companion. Not everything we ask for is truly God's best for us. Perhaps God has something else in store that will be a better answer than what we can imagine at the moment. So if we are simply patient and wait, we will often see in retrospect that some of God's biggest blessings to us have been those prayers that He chose not to answer—at least not in the way we were requesting.

Even though we can trust that God hears and answers our prayers, prayer does not work according to a fixed formula: get your life in order, say the right words, and the answer will come. If that were true, Job would have avoided much suffering, Paul would have been relieved of his thorn in the flesh, and Christ would have been spared the Cross. Between the two questions "Does God answer prayer?" and "Will God grant my specific prayer?" lies a great pool of mystery. While wallowing in this mystery, it is important for us not to lose sight of the purpose of prayer. God is more important than any answer to our prayer. Oswald Chambers said, "Whenever our insistence is on the point that God answers prayer, we are off the track. The meaning of prayer is that we get hold of God, not of His answer. It is God we must have. He is more than enough for all that we need."

Chapter 8: Spiritual Leaders: A Challenge to Prayer-Driven Leadership

We do not have to practice prayer to be a leader. Saul was a leader—though he was leading in the wrong direction—before he encountered Christ, became Paul, and learned about the power of prayer. Chuck Colson was a great leader in politics before he ever prayed. A person can be a leader without being a pray-er, but a person has to pray to be a *spiritual* leader. As healthy plants require rain, so powerful spiritual leadership requires prayer. Prayer and Christian leadership unite to bring the blessings of God.

Lesson 8.1 The Need for Leaders Who Pray

Objectives

- 8.1.1** *Relate prayer to the ministry of the church.*
- 8.1.2** *Identify the difference between a natural leader and a spiritual leader.*
- 8.1.3** *State how God will accomplish His purpose on this earth and how this compares with how some ministers attempt to accomplish their ministries.*

Lesson 8.2 The Benefits of Leaders Who Pray

Objectives

- 8.2.1** *Identify four ways in which leaders who pray are enriched personally.*
- 8.2.2** *Identify how leaders who pray enrich the church corporately.*

Lesson 8.3 The Peril When Leaders Do Not Pray

Objectives

- 8.3.1** *State the percentage of leaders who are satisfied with their prayer lives, and identify some contributing factors to this number.*
- 8.3.2** *Discuss two repercussions that occur when leaders do not pray.*

8.3.3 Identify three cautions regarding prayer that leaders should heed.

Lesson 8.4 The Challenge to Prayer-Driven Leadership

Objective

8.4.1 List ways that leaders can instill a passion for prayer in others and cultivate a corporate climate of prayer.

8.1	Lesson 8.1 The Need for Leaders Who Pray
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Direct Link Between Prayer and Ministry Effectiveness

Church researcher George Barna discovered that the only constant he ever found between effectiveness for the kingdom of God and another element was not some gifted person or fancy program but simply prayer. More important than all the financial and physical resources in the world, effectiveness in spiritual ministry is dependent upon prayer.

Relate prayer to the ministry of the church.

In Chapter 1, we focused on prayer as a scriptural and necessary foundation for effective ministry. For the Bible's extraordinary leaders, prayer was not a prelude to ministry; rather, prayer was their ministry. A keen awareness of our own insufficiencies and limitations as leaders should drive us to our knees. We will desire to be led by God when we recognize our inability to minister in our own strength. Furthermore, prayer is mandatory for some forms of ministry—it alone accomplishes some things that nothing else can. Consequently, the extent to which we are willing and able to weave the spiritual disciplines into our own private lives will determine our ability to minister effectively.

What relationship does prayer have with the ministry of the church?

In a 2005 nation-wide survey, every pastor surveyed listed the need for personal spiritual growth (Ricks 2005, 4). And it is no wonder; leaders face a host of post-modern issues for which they need God's guidance and wisdom. Churches expect their leaders to be available at all times day and night, to preach sermons that deeply touch them every Sunday, to grow the church numerically overnight, to keep pace with the latest trends in church life, to represent the church in the community, and to administrate the business of the church in a professional manner. Further, they are expected to grow spiritually, to be dedicated people of prayer, and to demonstrate what it means to lead a strong Christian family. It takes nothing short of divinity to meet all of these expectations. Church leaders need prayer—it is imperative for vital and effective ministry!

Natural Leadership and Spiritual Leadership

What are the distinguishing elements of a natural leader and a spiritual leader?

Simply put, leadership is the ability to influence others to follow one's lead. Chinese leader Li Hung Chang said, "There are three kinds of people. Those who are immovable, those who are movable, and those who move them." A leader is one who has the ability to move people—to inspire them to follow. A good test of leadership, then, is to find out whether anyone is following the leader, for as the old proverb says, "He who thinketh he leadeth and hath no one following him is only taking a walk." If we define leadership as "the ability to get followers," then Hitler was a leader; Jim Jones was a leader; Winston Churchill was a leader; the apostle Paul was a leader, and so forth. Leadership abilities can be used to reach varying objectives. Consequently, it is imperative that we understand the difference between natural leadership and spiritual leadership.

***Identify the difference between a natural leader
and a spiritual leader.***

While natural and spiritual leadership have some similarities, they also have some crucial differences. J. Oswald Sanders identifies some of these distinguishing elements in his book *Spiritual Leadership* (Sanders 1980). They can be summarized as follows:

<u>Natural Leadership</u>	<u>Spiritual Leadership</u>
Natural abilities	Spiritual gifts
Self-confident	Confident in God
Makes own decisions	Seeks God's will
Ambitious	Humble
Enjoys authority	Delights in obedience to God
Motivated by self	Motivated by love for God and people
Independent	Depends on God
Serves self	Serves others

As you can see, there is a critical difference between natural leadership and spiritual leadership: reliance on the Spirit in order to achieve spiritual ends. The world may not always appreciate the characteristics of spiritual leadership, but Paul notes,

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—

to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:27–31)

Why is natural leadership not enough to be an effective leader?

Natural leadership on its own is not enough. (In the examples of Adolf Hitler and Jim Jones, it can be dangerous.) Spiritual ends can only be achieved by spiritual men and women who are Spirit-led. Yes, natural abilities are important and should be developed. But natural talents alone cannot produce effective spiritual leaders. We can have leadership skills and simply be a good leader, not a good spiritual leader. Personal charisma and skills will take a leader only so far. Skills and public persona will only last for a season, which could be a reason for the high ministry dropout rate. A 1998 Pew Research Study found that half the number of ministers who are ordained leave their post within five years, with the main cause often cited as burnout. Many ministers become casualties because they are so busy with the work of ministry that they neglect both themselves and God. We must learn to see prayer as God’s way of providing what we need to sustain us in ministry.

If leadership involves getting people to follow our lead, we must ask ourselves this question: “Spiritually, where am I leading the people entrusted to my care?” More specifically, “When it comes to prayer, am I moving others toward increased intimacy with God?” We can lead others only as far into the prayer journey as we ourselves have traveled. Merely pointing the way is not enough. If we are not walking the path of prayer, then how can we lead anyone in prayer? We are simply functioning as a natural leader, not as a spiritual leader.

***State how God will accomplish
His purpose***

The church today has many great leaders, but few great *spiritual* leaders. The spiritual leader should outpace the rest of the church in prayer. A church cannot be expected to surpass its leader in spiritual power and godliness. No matter what the current state of your prayer life, there is the possibility of limitless development.

Not By Might, Nor By Power, But By the Spirit

The focus of God's plan to reach the world is not dependent on eloquent communication skills, professional business practices, entertaining programs, or large auditoriums. While these may all be employed on occasion quite effectively, they are simply tools to accomplish His ministry. The primary means by which God will accomplish His purposes on earth is through the power of the Spirit. For it is "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6). Paul had it straight: "When I came to you ... my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Corinthians 2:1–4). If God works through the power of the Spirit, then spiritual leaders had better be listening to—and operating in the power of—the Spirit.

**What are the benefits of having
leaders who pray?**

We can develop a false sense of security in our human abilities and resources; consequently, we end up ministering from our own strength instead of the Spirit's. We minister as if we were the change agent, rather than merely the channel for the change agent. Because of this, many Christian leaders spend all of their time frantically trying to do everything and, in the busyness of ministry, neglect the replenishing of their spiritual reservoirs. When ministry becomes a substitute for prayer, it becomes self-

dependent and ineffective. From the earliest days of the church, the leaders did not let themselves get distracted with the important—but secondary—tasks of ministry. Instead, they devoted themselves to prayer and the Word (Acts 6:2). The power to fulfill our calling comes not from our own strength, but from the Spirit at work in us.

The priority of prayer must be central to our philosophy of ministry, and our entire approach to life and leadership. This is a missional issue—prayer must be part of our core values or it will never happen. We all know that if we do not make a meaningful prayer life a priority, it is not going to just magically happen on its own. Life is too busy, and the important always gets swallowed in the tyranny of the urgent.

At the 2007 National AG Prayer Summit, Pastor Jim Bradford challenged church leaders to maintain a strong prayer life. Reflecting on Malachi 2:1–2, he examined how the Old Testament priests had fallen into disfavor with God—not because of what they did, but because in their hearts they were no longer honoring Him. “What we do as spiritual leaders,” Bradford warned, “must never be reduced to a performance.” However, leadership, by its very nature, tends to “externalize you, professionalize you, cynicize you and make you way too political.” Few things are more toxic to spiritual health than religious leadership—there are so many traps, including doing so much for God that our personal relationship with God is neglected. It is easy to get so focused outwardly that we let our personal relationship with God deteriorate. Christian leaders must transition from doing things for God to God doing things through them in the power of the Spirit.

8.2	Lesson 8.2 The Benefits of Leaders Who Pray
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A Praying Leader Is Enriched Personally

A praying leader is enriched, personally, in so many ways. First, prayer gets us in contact with God so that His life and power can flow through us. We are simply channels through which He flows. Prayer reminds us that we are not the ultimate leaders; the Lord Jesus is. We are stewards, not the owners. Sometimes kneeling physically helps us with this step.

Identify four ways in which leaders who pray are enriched personally.

Second, prayer provides the strength we need to carry out our tasks. As we wait upon the Lord, we will soar on wings like eagles. We will run and not grow weary (Isaiah 40:31). Prayer helps us find an exhilarating confidence that lets us concentrate fully upon the task. The busier we become, the more we need to spend time with God. Martin Luther, at the height of the Reformation, declared: “I am so busy that unless I pray more hours every day, I will not get my work done.”

What are four ways leaders are enriched personally by prayer?

Third, prayer renews vision. Remember the apostles in Acts 6? They had a clear vision for what God had called them to do (Acts 6:1–6). The disciples declared, “It is not right for us to leave the ministry of the Word and prayer.” They had discovered that the greatest service they could offer the church was their prayers and spending time in the Word. Unless prayer was lived in them, they could not birth it in others. Such purpose can only come through spending time with God. Prayer helps us keep our focus by enabling us to see from God’s perspective, to gain His sense of what we should do. Prayer becomes most effective when we shift into neutral and accept divine leadership. This can be difficult because many leaders are strong-willed and feel uncomfortable in neutral. It is so much easier to ask God’s approval of what we want to do than to say “Your will be done” and mean it. We must honestly separate personal interest from the ministry interest, allowing the Lord to instill His vision for the ministry.

Finally, prayer refreshes us in times of discouragement. This truth is brought to life in the writings of Rebecca Barlow-Jordan who reflects on the experiences of Jonah and Elijah (Barlow-Jordan 2006, 1). Jonah was swallowed alive by a fish—and yet as he prayed, he was praising God for his deliverance and salvation. The prayer of Jonah should encourage us that we

can pray in the midst of discouragement and failure, even when our distress has been caused by our own doing. This is a critical lesson to learn because that is often when it seems the most difficult to pray; we feel we have no right to call on God, because we do not deserve His help. More than likely we do not; however, grace is getting something we do not deserve.

The mighty prophet Elijah is another example of prayer's power in times of discouragement. He had witnessed a powerful, miraculous event: a standoff between good and evil. God had destroyed the altar of Baal, along with a host of Baal's followers. God had answered Elijah's prayer. The drama continued, however, when wicked Queen Jezebel cried revenge. Elijah, mighty man of God, suddenly turned into the coward of Judah County and ran for the hills. Depressed and suicidal, he begged God to take his life. But there, he heard from God, and God encouraged Elijah with specific instructions exactly at his point of need (1 Kings 19:11–18). In times of discouragement, like Elijah, we will hear the unmistakable, audible whisper of God, gently and patiently letting us know He is in control. He has the resources for battle; we are not alone.

A Praying Leader Enriches the Church, Corporately

In addition to being blessed personally, a praying leader enriches his or her congregation in so many ways.

Identify how leaders who pray enrich the church corporately.

First, a praying leader allows God to move the hearts of people. Instead of feeling the pressure to convince, coerce, or manipulate people into doing what needs to be done, a praying leader lets God instill the vision and burden upon their hearts. As God moves in their hearts, prayer promotes the individual believer's personal growth in becoming like Christ. Furthermore, prayer is a God-ordained means of raising up leaders, for it helps people discover their purpose in life.

Second, a praying leader allows God to do what he or she cannot do. An important role of prayer is to ask God to do what we cannot do. For example, we cannot permeate our projects with His Spirit, and so we ask

Him to. We cannot convict of sin (we lay guilt trips), so we ask Him to. We cannot know the mind of God, but the Spirit searches the mind of God for us.

In what five ways does a praying leader enrich the church corporately?

Third, a praying leader leads the body in God's direction. Through prayer, we learn the mind and will of God (Romans 8:26–29). Often we are unaware of the need to change direction, so we ask God for wisdom to be given at the right time and to guide us in the right direction. It is good when a congregation seeks His will together and is willing to do it when it appears. This can help people to recognize God as the ultimate leader rather than a specific person.

Fourth, a praying leader enables the Body to fight its spiritual opposition. Anyone working in ministry is a sure target of the enemy and especially needs the protection afforded by prayer. If we do not maintain an eternal perspective, we will lose focus and begin experiencing conflict based on human issues. A wise leader recognizes that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood and addresses the battle headlong where it is being fought (Ephesians 6). For today's church to remain strong in the midst of an evil society, it must be a praying church—for it is only through prayer that we can fight the enemy. Success in the small battles will bring us authority in the larger.

Fifth, a praying leader facilitates revival because prayer always precedes revival. When we read the biographies of William Carey, Adoniram Judson, David Livingstone, Hudson Taylor, and others like them, the initiating thrust of their work began in prayer encounters. In Korea, where the church has grown from almost zero to a projected 50 percent of the entire population in this century alone, Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho attributes his church's conversion rate of twelve thousand people per month as primarily due to ceaseless prayer. In Korea it is normal for church members to go to bed early so they can arise at four a.m. to participate in united prayer. It is normal for them to pray all through Friday nights. It is normal to go out to prayer retreats. Cho says that any church might see this sort of phenomenal

growth if they are prepared to “pray the price,” to “pray and obey.” Cho was once asked by a local pastor why Cho’s church membership was 750,000 and his was only 3,000 when he was better educated, preached better sermons, and even had a foreign wife? Cho inquired, “How much do you pray?” The pastor said, “Thirty minutes a day.” To which Cho replied, “There is your answer. I pray from three to five hours per day.”

In America, surveys have shown that pastors on average pray twenty-two to thirty-nine minutes per day. In Japan, Christians pray forty-four minutes a day; Korean Christians pray ninety minutes a day; and Chinese Christians pray 120 minutes a day. It is not surprising that the growth rate of churches in those countries is directly proportional to the amount of time pastors are spending in prayer.

To summarize, prayer is foundational for everything that goes on in the life of the leader as well as in the church. It is critical that ministers maintain regular prayer time and that churches facilitate prayer efforts for all their ministries, promoting prayer efforts throughout the year.

8.3

Lesson 8.3 The Peril When Leaders Do Not Pray

The Current State of Leaders and Prayer

One of the most prayerless spheres can be among church leaders. Study about God, or religiosity in the name of God, can subtly become substitutes for a personal relationship with Him. Several years ago a *Newsweek* survey revealed that theological students are “artful dodgers of a disciplined prayer life.” The survey commented, “They use social action, spiritual guruism ... and a scrupulously academic approach to the study of religion as a substitute to evade the problem of a totally religious life of prayer (Houston 1989, 16).

State the percentage of leaders who are satisfied with their prayer lives, and identify some contributing factors to this number.

Apparently this has not changed. A 2005 survey was taken among more than 1,300 evangelical leaders from around the world to determine what they perceived to be the top 10 issues facing today's church. Leaders cited the "need for more ongoing, passionate prayer in both personal and church life" as the most pressing concern (LifeWay Christian Resources 2005). A follow-up study revealed that only 16 percent of Protestant ministers are "very satisfied" with their personal prayer lives. (A follow-up study was conducted for LifeWay Christian Resources by Ellison Research of Phoenix. The study surveyed a nationally representative sample of 860 Protestant church pastors.)

The study asked pastors how long they spent in prayer each day and what they prayed for. The median amount of prayer time per day is thirty minutes, with a mean of thirty-nine minutes. How do ministers spend their prayer time? The average pastor spends twelve minutes per day with prayer requests, eight minutes in quiet time, seven minutes giving thanks, seven minutes in praise, and five minutes confessing sin.

How can a leader have a satisfying prayer life?

What defines pastors who are satisfied with their prayer lives versus those who are not? According to the study, factors include

- 1. The amount of time spent in prayer: Pastors who are very satisfied spend an average of fifty-six minutes a day in prayer.**
- 2. How they divide their prayer time: Ministers who are very satisfied spend considerably less time than average making requests and considerably more time in silence, listening to God; other areas (confession, praise, thanksgiving) are about the same.**
- 3. What they pray for: The more satisfied ministers are with their prayer lives, the more likely they are to spend time praying for larger issues beyond their own lives and churches (overseas missions, persecuted Christians in other countries, local outreach and evangelism efforts, other local churches and pastors, global events, the country as a whole, individual Christian leaders, individual**

government leaders, and their denomination). However, they are no less likely to pray for personal and church needs such as church growth or personal finances.

In short, the study clearly showed that what drives a satisfying prayer life for a minister is spending less time asking God for things and more time listening to what God has to say, praying for issues beyond their own personal and church needs, and spending much more time overall in prayer.

Prayer is the central issue to effective ministry, yet meaningful prayer requires time. Since church leaders' days are long and demands for their time are continuous, daily time with the Lord easily can be neglected. Many church leaders feel they are too busy to pray, but if that is true, they are just plain too busy. Often, they use their full-time service as an excuse for not devoting personal time to prayer and fellowshiping with God. They feel their service for Him is spending time with Him. But if we are going to be fit to work for God, we must always spend time with God.

When Leadership Is Not Characterized by Prayer

Our prayer lives are critical to our spiritual well-being. Our prayer lives cannot be neglected without hurting ourselves and our ability to lead. What happens if leadership is given to men and women who are not characterized by prayer? Many consequences could be discussed; two will be highlighted here.

Discuss two repercussions that occur when leaders do not pray.

What can result from a lack of prayer in leadership?

First, if church leaders are not people of prayer, the Body will suffer spiritual anemia. When prayer is overlooked or added as an afterthought to ministry, the power of God is often absent. It is dangerously easy to move

away from dependence on God and to slip into the trap of self-reliance. But prayer and action are complementary, not contradictory, and it is wise to overlap them as much as possible. Christian service is most effective when prayer not only precedes it but also flows together with it (Boa 2001, 93). Without prayerful leadership, the church will neither reach its divine destiny nor arrive at the “unity of the faith” and “in the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:13).

Second, leaders who fail to pray could be setting themselves up for a fall. The same hindrances to prayer are the barriers to a holy life. Proverbs 4:23 states, “Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” Sin is always the result of progressive steps, small compromises that at the time are indiscernible. One of those progressive steps, those compromises, may be a failure to keep your first love—failure to tend to your love relationship with the Lord. Often those who fall into sin can point back to lapses in their practice of the spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and the healthy self-examination that the disciplines foster. Most ministers know this, but in the busyness of giving out, they can easily neglect the replenishing of their spiritual reservoirs.

Nothing that we do or think is without impact on our spiritual lives, and conversely, the spiritual life influences every other dimension of our being. Authentic spirituality is naturally holistic—it should be integrated into every aspect of our lives. The Spirit insists on transforming us at every level! But, instead of taking a holistic approach to life, we have compartmentalized our lives—thought life, family life, work life, spiritual life, and so on, and the various boxes never intersect. This allows a person to be one way in one place, and another way in another place. For example, we have heard of pastors who are nice at church, but grouchy at home. But how we are doing physically affects our emotional or spiritual health. How we are doing spiritually or emotionally affects us physically. If we are not doing well spiritually, it will ultimately have ramifications in other areas of our lives.

Three Cautions Regarding Prayer

In an article in the journal *Leadership*, Christian leader and author Fred Smith, Sr., highlights three common pitfalls that leaders should avoid when it comes to prayer: disuse, misuse, and abuse (Smith 1994).

Identify three cautions regarding prayer that leaders should heed.

What three common pitfalls to prayer should Christian leaders avoid?

First, Christian leaders should guard against the *disuse* of prayer. Some ministers fail to pray because they rely on human ability, rather than on God's ability. They may be good leaders, as opposed to good spiritual leaders. When spiritual leadership becomes weak through lessened prayer, then prayer gets pushed further and further down the organizational agenda. Decreased prayer can even occur in times of outward success. One writer says it well: "If I am so successful, why do I feel so phony?" The reason is this:

Success often lessens our urgency for prayer. As a work gains momentum, the needs *in* prayer change, but not the need *for* prayer. An organization on a roll needs prayer for direction; a struggling work needs prayer for support to keep it alive. But both organizations need prayer just as much.

A second caution is the *misuse* of prayer. For example, the purpose for prayer is not to make announcements or to persuade people to your view. I once heard a speaker ask the audience to pray while he spoke. This, too, can be a misuse; a preacher should ask people to listen, not to pray. Lack of preparation on the leader's part cannot be suddenly overcome through prayer; only once do we know of the sun standing still (Joshua 10:12–14). Leadership through great sermons and Sunday school lessons will not come without preparation, no matter how sincerely we pray.

Sermons are preceded by prayer but developed through work. Study to be informed; pray to be wise. Finally, when leaders become hesitant to make a crucial decision, prayer can be misused as a pious way to procrastinate. Who can criticize a leader who asks for more time in order to pray, even

though he or she is really hiding his or her fear and indecision? A leader needs to face fears and indecision, not cover them with a prayer shawl.

The third caution for Christian leaders when it comes to prayer is not to step over a fine line from misuse to *abuse*. Misuse comes from ignorance, while abuse comes from the wrong attitude and motive. Sometimes a leader lets followers listen in while he or she thanks God for revealing what the organization is supposed to do. Such prayers claim knowledge of God's will in order to line up followers. Prayer is not a substitute for intelligent effort, careful planning, efficient selection of people, or adequate financing.

A Christian business leader once resigned from a college board because of the repeated calls for *seasons of prayer* to get the college out of financial difficulties. The businessman believed in prayer, but not as a substitute for responsible financial management. The board had never given any financial statements or operating figures; in fact, none existed other than the depleted bank account and unpaid bills. As leaders, we have no right to pray for what we can do, for God has already supplied that need.

8.4

Lesson 8.4 The Challenge to Prayer-Driven Leadership

Christian leaders have the privilege and responsibility of leading people in prayer. One of our highest joys will be to help usher people into the throne room of grace, where they can enjoy the pleasure of an intimate, soul-shaping, relationship with God.

Be a Spiritual Leader of Prayer

Spiritual leaders must be people of prayer. A meaningful prayer life is a prerequisite to effective ministry. Without it, you are just a good leader, not a good spiritual leader. A person of prayer does not merely talk about prayer, but lives a life of prayer and believes passionately in its importance for growing deeper in Christ and for accomplishing God's purposes. The healthy model of a praying leader will provide the strongest motivation for people to pray.

Instill a Passion for Prayer in Others

List ways that leaders can instill a passion for prayer in others and cultivate a corporate climate of prayer.

If we are to instill a passion for prayer in others, we must consistently emphasize the importance of prayer, as well as provide sound teaching on how to develop a meaningful prayer life. Since our prayer is directly related to our understanding of God, perhaps the best way to teach prayer is to teach the doctrine of God.

How can a leader instill a passion for prayer in others?

In addition to encouraging believers to make their personal prayer lives a priority, spiritual leaders need to cultivate a corporate climate of prayer. We do this by ensuring that prayer is not just given lip service, but that it is central to the mission and operation of the ministry. Sadly, many churches have more time devoted to announcements in their services than they do to prayer. One leader said, “When we announce a church potluck, people come out by the hoards. But when we announce an all-night prayer meeting, we are lucky if the board shows up.” We need to create prominent opportunities for dynamic corporate prayer. Leaders can encourage the congregation to pray specifically for lost people and unreached people groups, to recognize the spiritual conditions of their communities, to pray for a spiritual awakening, to pray for new congregations to reach new people for the kingdom of God, and to pray for believers to be mobilized in missions opportunities.

Chapter 9: Cultivating a Life of Worship

The practices by which followers of God express devotion, reverence, and love to God have often divided the church. This conflict even predates the church, as evidenced in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:19–20). How telling about the self-centeredness of human nature that we could turn something that is preeminently about God into something about our own preferences and traditions. Worship is a mandatory response of the creature to the Creator, but if it is to be biblically authentic, spiritually healthy, and eternally valid it must be about God, not about us!

Unfortunately, worship has become a synonym for the performing arts done in a religious context. Worship is first and foremost the character of a relationship between the finite creature and the infinite Creator. The chapters in this unit explore the essence of worship from a biblical

perspective. The use of the arts in expressing a worshipful relationship with God are discussed in some length. It is critical for all followers of Jesus, especially those who would be spiritual leaders, to understand and practice God-honoring worship. Out of our worship of God flows all true service, including leading others in worship. May you grow in Spirit-led dedication to the adoration and honoring of God as you study the chapters in this unit.

Chapter 9 Wired to Worship: Experiencing God through Worship

Lessons

9.1 Discovering What Worship Is

9.2 Differentiating What Worship Is Not

Chapter 10 Grounded in Worship: Worship in the Scriptures

Lessons

10.1 Worship in the Commandments

10.2 Worship in the Tabernacle

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Chapter 11 Gathered for Worship: Worship in the Church

Lessons

11.1 Coming Together for Worship

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Chapter 12 A Life of Worship: Worship in the Everyday

Lessons

12.1 Laying our Lives on the Altar

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9

Chapter 9 Wired to Worship: Experiencing God Through Worship

People everywhere worship, but it is not always God who gets their praise and adoration. Sadly, some people get more enthused over an athlete or entertainer than they do the God of the Universe. We might find it exciting to witness the same energy of cheerleaders and fans at a ball game that we see in worship leaders in a church service, but it is *not* the same: the worship of God is holy. Nonetheless, consider the adulation rock stars get at concerts—this is praise by almost any definition of the word. Deferential treatment afforded a celebrity is likewise a form of worship by most definitions of the word.

For those acquainted with the baptism in the Holy Spirit, those who have watched the excited and energetic moment of someone who was touched by God, the ecstatic moment when God is undeniably, unquestionably, and undoubtedly real in such a personal experience—this is pure worship. The utterances, the speaking in tongues, whether or not understood by the people nearby, that too is praise. When God shows up, when He touches your soul, you discover that we are wired to worship. You discover that praise is as natural, perhaps more so, than breathing.

Lesson 9.1 Discovering What Worship Is

Objectives

- 9.1.1 State the origins of the word worship.*
- 9.1.2 Summarize the relationship between God's revelation and our response in worship.*
- 9.1.3 Discuss how worship is a lifestyle.*
- 9.1.4 Describe how our purpose in life is related to worship.*

Lesson 9.2 Differentiating What Worship is Not

Objectives

- 9.2.1 Differentiate between praise and worship.*
- 9.2.2 Discuss the dangers of equating music with worship.*

9.2.3 Explain why going to church is not an adequate definition of worship.

9.1

Lesson 9.1 Discovering What Worship Is

Origins

Our English word *worship* comes from two roots. *Weorth* means “honor” or “worthiness,” and *scipe* means “to create” (Dawn 1995, 76). To worship someone or something is to create an expression of honor or to attribute worth to the object of worship. So when we acknowledge God’s infinite value in our lives, we lift our souls to Him in praise and we offer our bodies to Him as living sacrifices. We could say that this is essentially “worth-ship.”

State the origins of the word worship.

What is worship?

The two most commonly used words in the New Testament are *proskuneo* and *latreia*. *Proskuneo* literally means “to kiss toward” (Kimball 2003, 114), and speaks of the physical nature of worship, particularly of kneeling or falling prostrate as an expression of reverence (Thayer 1999). The early origins of this word come from kissing the ground as an act of reverence to the deities of the earth (Charles Ryrie, quoted in Kimball 2003, 114). *Latreia*, on the other hand, means serving or ministering, and has priestly connotations (Thayer 1999). Christians are called to *latreia* as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). What an honor it

is to be called to minister as a priest to God through worship! What a privilege it is to “kiss the Son” (Psalm 2:12)!

Revelation and Response

I remember very distinctly the first time I saw Kris, the lady I would later marry. We had an instant chemistry—an attraction that compelled me to invite her to have dinner with me on Valentine’s Day, our first date. However, this romantic attraction was not enough to sustain the relationship. It was not until I spent time with her and got to really *know* her that I could truly say I loved her. Over the years our love has grown and matured as we have revealed ourselves to each other. I love my wife so much more today than I ever did earlier in our relationship because, through the years, she has revealed who she is to me.

Summarize the relationship between God’s revelation and our response in worship.

So it is in our relationship with God. We cannot truly love God or worship Him adequately until He first reveals himself to us. And this is what He does:

What is the relationship between God’s revelation and the human act of worship?

God comes to us through his Word in the power of the Spirit and offers us—among other things—love, truth, conviction, grace, forgiveness, comfort, exhortation, and guidance. When we see God for who he is and experience all that he offers, we respond in humility, gratitude, and faith with such acts as confession, repentance, commitment, adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, and celebration. (Rognlien 2005, 30)

How does God reveal himself? Give scriptural support for each response.

This is the essence of worship: God reveals himself to us, and we respond to Him. In the process, we are transformed.

How does God reveal himself? Romans 1:20 tells us that God is revealed through the cosmos. Second Peter 1:21 teaches that the Scripture is God's revelation to humanity. Romans 10:14 reminds us that people come to know God through the preaching of the gospel. As we come to know Him through what He made, through His Word, and through the message of the gospel, we respond. We confess our sin, we turn from our sinful behavior, and our lives are transformed. We respond in worship. Songwriter David Crowder says, "When our depravity meets His divinity, it is a beautiful collision" (Sixsteps Records, 2005). This collision is what Bob Rognlien calls a "transforming intersection" (2005, 23–24). God reveals himself. We respond, are transformed, and become worshippers.

A Lifestyle of Worship

I once visited with a woman who told me that her dream was to vacation, just once, on Turtle Island, a place she had seen profiled on the television show *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. For her, a tropical vacation was something she would experience only once in her lifetime. For the rich and famous, however, such vacations are *lifestyles*, events that occur regularly.

Discuss how worship is a lifestyle.

It is easy for us to think of worship as something that occurs only periodically in our lives. We can become so busy that we never cultivate an awareness of God's constant revelation of himself to us, and consequently we fail to worship. As mentioned in the previous chapter, we can tend to compartmentalize our lives so completely that we relegate our expressions of love for God to once a week on Sundays, and we fail to worship daily.

Worse yet, we can let musicians worship God for us, and we miss our calling to be worshippers.

**How can worship be
a lifestyle?**

Scripture calls us to cultivate a lifestyle of worship. In Romans 12:1, Paul urges Christians to “offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” The apostle calls us to offer our bodies to God, not just our spirits, as instruments of worship. He reminds us that worship is a sacrifice, not simply something we do when it is convenient. And sacrifices must be holy and pleasing to God, which indicates that the way we live influences our worship. Apostle Paul says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). Transformation, renewal, and living in the center of God’s will—these all combine to produce a lifestyle of worship for the believer.

Many people mistakenly assume that their identity is found in their jobs, in their children, or in their accomplishments. Worshippers, however, understand that “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God and fully to enjoy him forever” (Westminster Confession, quoted in Dawn 1995, 76). If that is true, then worship must become a constant in our lives—a habit, if you will. David Crowder uses a play on words to describe the habit of worship. He observes that a habit is an act that is performed regularly and automatically (Crowder 2004, 25). But an alternate definition of the word is *clothing*, as in a nun’s habit. In describing nuns’ clothing he writes this:

The habit is what she wears. It is what covers her. It is what identifies her. Our condition is the same. Our habit is the Christ. He is what covers us. He is what identifies us. We wear Him into every moment, and when we live with this awareness, we praise Christ. (Crowder 2004, 39)

Lifestyle worship means that our ministry to God is habitual—it is what we wear and is constant. Worshipping God is what covers us.

A Life with Purpose

I love to read the descriptions of the heavenly worship in the book of Revelation. It is majestic, emotional, physical, and extravagant, and it is all focused on God. In one of these descriptions we find this beautiful expression of praise: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:11, KJV). It helps us to understand what the heavenly worshippers are proclaiming: The purpose of all creation is to bring God pleasure.

Describe how our purpose in life is related to worship.

Countless authors have affirmed this truth. Rick Warren says, “You were planned for God’s pleasure” (Warren 2002, 63). Gary Erickson writes, “Worship is the supreme purpose of humanity (Erickson 1989, 223). Louis Giglio proclaims, “You exist for one purpose alone—to reflect back to God His matchless glory” (Giglio 2003, 16). If worship is our purpose, then we must worship purposefully.

What does worship have to do with our purpose on earth?

Worship has a powerful influence on our lives. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, people everywhere are worshipping. But what or whom we are worshipping changes everything, because the things we value and pay homage to are the things that demand our submission, our loyalty, and our investment. One author said that the trail of our time, our affection, our energy, our money, and our allegiance lead to who and what we worship (Giglio 2003, 11).

To worship God, then, is to submit to Him, to be loyal to Him, and to invest our resources and lives in His kingdom. His will becomes our obsession. Transformation flows from the core of our being, as His will is worked out through our worship. As a result, God is glorified more and

more as we are “conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). Irenaeus said this, “The glory of God is man fully alive” (Irenaeus, quoted in White 1980, 20).

When we worship God, we are acknowledging His supremacy and are confessing our deficiency. We are becoming all that He purposed us to be. Erickson says it well, “It is not abnormal to worship; in fact, not to worship is abnormal” (Erickson 1989, 223).

9.2

Lesson 9.2 Differentiating What Worship Is Not

An old skit I have participated in many times during mission trips and other street-ministry occasions is called “Just Because.” In the skit, several actors portray different identities that are associated with a certain location. For instance, the narrator announces that the actors are in a swamp, and immediately each actor begins hopping around like a frog. The narrator stops the action with the line, “Just because you are in a swamp does not make you a frog.” The idea continues with a racetrack. All the actors zoom around the stage like cars, and the narrator interrupts the action again. “Just because you are at a racetrack does not make you a car.” The punch line to the skit comes when the actors find themselves in a church, praying, praising, preaching, or directing a choir. The narrator solemnly announces, “Just because you are in a church does not make you a Christian.”

The same is true with worship. This lesson will explain how we can praise God but still not be worshippers. We can sing worship music, but still not be worshippers. We can even go to church every Sunday and not be true worshippers.

Worship Is Not Praise

We have already established that worship is our response to the revelation of God. Worship is a lifestyle, not an event, and bringing God pleasure is the purpose of our existence. But praise is not always synonymous with worship.

***Differentiate between praise
and worship.***

Praise is fundamentally an outward expression of a worshipful life. The Bible declares that all of creation is called to praise God. “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy” (Psalm 96:11–12).

All of creation does indeed praise God—that is, it reveals who He is and points to His majesty—but creation does not worship God. The earth, the sea, the fields, and the trees are not worshippers. People are worshippers.

**What is the fundamental difference
between praise and worship?**

So what is the distinction between praise and worship? Praise acknowledges what God has done, and proclaims who He is. “Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness” (Psalm 150:2). Praise calls forth God’s presence: “You are enthroned ... you are the praises of Israel” (Psalm 22:3). Praise is a means of overcoming depression or despair:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. (Isaiah 61:1, 3) (Webber 1997, 21–25.)

Praise is an outward expression, but worship encompasses all of life. We can certainly praise God without worshipping Him. We can proclaim the truth of God without serving Him with our whole lives. We can participate in singing praise without being moved to heartfelt response. But true worshippers offer themselves wholly in praise and worship.

Worship Is Not Music

In the same way that praise is not synonymous with worship, music is not the same as worship. When I was growing up in a small Assemblies of God church, our Sunday worship experience always included what was called the *song service*. Today many churches call this time *praise and worship*, and quite often it is simply called *worship*. To me, calling the musical portion of the service a song service seems old-fashioned, and it also devalues the significance of praising God with music. However, to call only this part of our services worship is to convey the idea that music is worship. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Discuss the dangers of equating music with worship.

Why is it dangerous to equate music with worship?

Like praise, music that speaks of the majesty of God, proclaims the message of the gospel or testifies of our experience with Christ is simply an outward expression of worshipful hearts. However, we can worship God beautifully in many creative ways without music. The truth is, music is a great tool with which to praise God, but it is not the essence of worship itself. It is just a tool.

Lead worshipper Matt Redman tells of a time in his church when the leadership team recognized that the congregation had become dependent on all the technology that was used during their praise and worship expressions. The lights, the sound system, the band, and the projection system all combined to provide a beautiful environment that pointed people to God. But over time, the church leaders realized that if things did not operate perfectly, people would not participate.

The Heart of Worship

by Matt Redman

When the music fades,

All is stripped away,

And I simply come;

**Longing just to bring
something that's of worth**

That will bless Your heart.

**I'll bring You more than a
song,**

For a song in itself

**Is not what You have
required.**

**You search much deeper
within**

**Through the way things
appear;**

You're looking into my heart.

**I'm coming back to the heart
of worship,**

And it's all about You,

All about You, Jesus.

**I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing
I've made it,**

When it's all about You,

**All about You, Jesus. (2001,
104)**

This is the problem with equating music with worship. If the leader sings poorly or the guitar is too loud, some of us fold our arms and refuse to participate. If the lights are too harsh or the projectionist puts the wrong words on the screen, we may harrumph and stand silent. If the team sings too many new songs and too few familiar hymns, we may grit our teeth and leave church with bitter hearts. People who do these kinds of things have equated music with worship.

The leaders in Redman’s church made a radical decision. For a time they removed all the worship accouterments and sang with only one vocalist and a guitar. No fancy lights, no band, no fancy technology (Redman 2001, 103). The point was to communicate clearly that music is not worship. Music is only a tool to lead people into worship. Redman wrote a great song called “The Heart of Worship” (see above) that expresses what his church was experiencing.

All of us need to be reminded that while music is an important and valuable worship tool, it is not worship itself. We can worship God beautifully with or without music, and, indeed, we can even worship God with bad music.

Worship Is Not Going to Church

In many Christian traditions the weekly church service is called *worship*, and many people believe that to worship is to go to church. However, just as being in a pond does not make you a frog, being in a church service does not make you a worshipper.

Explain why going to church is not an adequate definition of worship.

The dangers with equating church attendance with worship are similar to the dangers of equating music with worship. If the church service does not satisfy our spiritual needs, we disengage. If the services are not entertaining enough, we shop around for a better church. If the minister does not communicate to our liking (“He is a teacher and we need a preacher”), we complain and miss the whole point of church attendance.

Perhaps the biggest danger with equating church attendance with worship is that it requires no action on the part of the attendee. This can lead to what Gary Erickson calls “pseudo-worship.” He writes this:

Why is it dangerous to equate *going to church* with worship?

One of the reasons for such great success among televangelists is that most denominational church services are just a performance by a few. The congregation assembles to sit in a detached and passive manner. They watch and listen to a handful of people do religious things. Therefore, staying at home and watching a televised church service instead of actually attending a service is not really very different ... In most cases the televised program is more professional and entertaining. (Erickson 1989, 97)

Just as we are able to go through the motions of praise or singing without truly worshipping, we can also attend church (or just watch it on television) without truly worshipping. God is calling us to a much deeper worship, worship that penetrates to the very core of our beings. God is revealing himself to us, and He is awaiting our response. He is waiting for us to offer Him our bodies as living sacrifices, to worship Him with our whole lives.

While it is true that being in church does not make one a Christian (or a worshipper), we must also highlight a parallel truth. Simply going to a church service can be a profound and sincere act of worship. Consider the follower of Jesus who rejects all the alternatives competing for his or her time and attention and instead, goes to church. The very act of saying “no” to all other optional activities in favor of congregating with those whose attention is on God can be, in itself, an authentic act of worship. Even the effort of preparing and transporting myself to a church building may announce to the world my recognition of God’s worthiness. So, while it can be true that church attendance is a habit or self-serving act of little value, it can also represent behavior that declares the worthiness of God!

Chapter 10: Grounded in Worship:

Worship in the Scriptures

I have been privileged to worship in hundreds of churches all over the United States and in several other countries. I have had many experiences in many different types of churches, so I sometimes feel I have experienced every possible style of worship. I have witnessed many extremes in worship: from ecstatic demonstrations of spirituality to serene contemplative reverence; from groups of people so focused on God that they forgot about the passage of time to groups of disengaged attendees who appeared to have melded into their pews.

Jesus said the Father seeks worshippers who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). While an important part of worship is being prompted by the Spirit, an equally important part is being grounded in truth. This is why the Bible stresses the importance of a thorough understanding of worship.

Lesson 10.1 Worship in the Commandments

Objectives

- 10.1.1 Explain why the first and last objective of humankind is to worship God; reference the first commandments, Exodus 20, and the last exhortation of Scripture, Revelation 22:9.*
- 10.1.2 Tell how Jesus related the Shema to the primacy of worship.*

Lesson 10.2 Worship in the Tabernacle

Objectives

- 10.2.1 Explain the significance of tabernacle worship as it prefigured the church.*
- 10.2.2 Show the connection between the description of tabernacle worship in Psalm 100:4 and the New Testament worshipper.*
- 10.2.3 Explain how tabernacle worship was restored in the book of Acts.*

Lesson 10.3 Worship in the Psalms

Objectives

10.3.1 *Indicate why David was called a man after God's own heart in Acts 13:22.*

10.3.2 *Demonstrate how the book of Psalms affirms worship in joy and sorrow.*

Lesson 10.4 Jesus' Teaching on Worship

Objectives

10.4.1 *Explain why Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well was revolutionary.*

10.4.2 *Analyze the meaning behind Jesus' statement in John 4:23 that God is seeking worshippers who "will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."*

Lesson 10.5 Worship in Heaven

Objective

10.5.1 *Relate the primary activity of heaven as described in Revelation.*

10.1	Lesson 10.1 Worship in the Commandments
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Worship is the Beginning and the End

Clearly, God intends for us to be worshippers. God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). A part of being in the likeness of God is living in community. The Godhead is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So God observed that it was not good for Adam to be alone, so He created Eve. But even Eve was not enough for Adam: God would enjoy the garden with them in the cool of the day. We were created to be in community, not just with other humans, but with our Creator as well.

Just as the Bible begins with a story about the fellowship between people and their Creator, the Bible ends with the extravagant descriptions of

worship in heaven. Almost like bookends, Genesis and Revelation reveal the fact that God designed us to be worshippers.

According to Scripture, how do we know that our purpose in life is to worship God?

Explain why the first and last objective of humankind is to worship God; reference the first commandments, Exodus 20, and the last exhortation of Scripture, Revelation 22:9.

Similarly, the commandments of the Bible reinforce God's worship design. The first four commandments of Exodus 20 all refer to the primacy of worship in our lives. The first commandment tells us to worship God only. The second commandment prohibits us from creating our own gods to worship. The third commandment instructs us to honor God's name and His reputation. The fourth commandment calls us to spend an entire day as "a Sabbath to the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:10). Evidently, worship is so important to our Creator that He gave Moses four out of ten commandments that focus directly on worship.

Throughout Scripture, then, there are many more instructions, exhortations, and warnings about worship and how to worship well. And, like a bookend, one of the last commands in the Bible is to worship God. John records that as his visions came to an end he was inclined to fall down before the angel messenger. Quick to readjust John's focus, the angel exhorted him, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. *Worship God!*" (Revelation 22:9, emphasis added). Bible-believing Christians understand that worship is the beginning and the end (Erickson 1989, 11).

Hear, O Israel!

Another Old Testament commandment that affirms the centrality of worship to life is the famous *Shema* found in Deuteronomy 6:3–5. *Shema* means "hear" and is the first word in the Hebrew text, which is why this passage is referred to by that name: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the

Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” The passage instructs the worshipper to affirm this worship principle in every aspect: in child-rearing, in conversation, in night-time meditations, and by reminding ourselves to be lovers of Yahweh in practical ways.

What is the *Shema*?

How did Jesus use the Shema to reinforce the importance of worship?

Tell how Jesus related the Shema to the primacy of worship.

In the New Testament, Jesus reinforced the priority of worship to His followers and to the teachers of religious law when He referenced the Shema. One of the teachers asked Him: “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ” (Mark 12:28–30)

Notice that the Deuteronomy passage uses three words to describe how you are to love God: with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus quotes the Shema from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, commonly used in Jesus’ day, and this version includes loving God with all your mind (Rognlien 2005, 36). These four words: heart, soul, mind, and strength encompass every aspect of human life that can be offered to God in love and worship. To worship God with all our heart is to offer Him our will; to worship Him with all our soul is to worship Him with our emotions; to worship God with our mind is to

offer Him our intellect; and to worship Him with our strength is to offer Him our bodies.

Jesus said that this was the most important commandment in the Scriptures. Nothing else in our lives should ever compete with loving God completely. To worship God only in an emotional way is inadequate. To only offer Him intellectual assent is inadequate. To only express our love to Him inwardly is to miss the beauty and value of worshipping with our bodies. True worship must penetrate all of who we are.

10.2

Lesson 10.2 Worship in the Tabernacle

A Roadmap of Heaven

When I graduated from high school, a family friend—a college professor—gave me a world atlas as a gift. It has every imaginable type of map in it: political maps, physical maps, climate maps, vegetation maps, and population maps, just to name a few. At the time, I thought it was an odd gift, but over the years I have spent a lot of time pouring over the various maps in the volume, and I have come to appreciate the value of maps: they are small human-made copies of things that exist in reality. Whenever I take a trip, I spend time studying the appropriate maps so I can prepare myself for what I am going to experience. Maps, although they are only copies of actuality, can teach us a great deal about what exists in reality.

When God gave the Law to Moses, He also gave him a road map for worship: the Tabernacle. While Moses was forty days and nights on the mountain with God, the Lord gave him explicit instructions for constructing a house of worship, and He warned him, “Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings *exactly like the pattern* I will show you” (Exodus 25:9, emphasis added). When the people of Israel constructed the Tabernacle, they were careful to follow all of God’s instructions to the letter because they understood that this house of worship had a unique purpose.

Years later, after the ark of the covenant had been captured by Israel’s enemies, King David brought the ark back home and rebuilt the Tabernacle as a house of worship to the Lord. Again, the artisans carefully followed the

pattern God had given Moses because they understood the importance of this sanctuary. David dedicated the Tabernacle by dancing, singing, and celebrating with cymbals and trumpets.

How is worship in the Tabernacle like a road map for worship?

Explain the significance of tabernacle worship as it prefigured the church.

The book of Hebrews tells us that, like a road map, the worship in the Tabernacle was a “copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Hebrews 8:5). In the Tabernacle, the centerpiece of worship was the sacrifice—the means of cleansing people from sin. In heaven, the centerpiece of worship is the perfect sacrifice, the “Lamb who was slain” (Revelation 5:6–12). He is the Lord Jesus, who offered himself as a sacrifice for sin “once for all” (Hebrews 7:27). In the Tabernacle, the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place once a year to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. At the moment Christ died, the veil that separated common worshippers from the holy presence of Yahweh was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51), signifying that from that moment on, every worshipper could come into God’s holy presence because of Jesus’ perfect sacrifice. Hebrews 4:16 encourages us to approach the holy place “with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Today, although we worship in churches that are constructed differently from the Tabernacle of the Old Testament, we still worship according to the road map that God gave Moses. The focus of our worship is Jesus and His sacrifice (Webber 1992, 30), and He enables us to come into the Most Holy Place to commune with the Father.

Here are excerpts from David’s psalm of thanksgiving at the dedication of the Tabernacle (1 Chronicles 16:8–11; 31–34):

Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name;

**make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.
Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Look to the Lord and his strength;
seek his face always.
Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let them say among the nations, “The Lord reigns!”
Let the sea resound, and all that is in it;
let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them!
Then the trees of the forest will sing,
they will sing for joy before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.**

Entering Into Worship

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name” (Psalm 100:4). This classic verse from the psalter has been sung and quoted so often in our churches that many people may have lost sight of its impact. Yet, its popularity is a result of its significance. This one verse gives us a Tabernacle road map to authentic worship.

Show the connection between the description of tabernacle worship in Psalm 100:4 and the New Testament worshipper.

In addition to the altar of sacrifice and the Most Holy Place, there were other important worship spaces. Two of these worship spaces are mentioned in Psalm 100: the gate and the courts.

How does Psalm 100:4 relate to New Testament worship?

A worshipper would enter the Tabernacle through a gate—an elaborate curtain of blue, purple, and scarlet fabric (Exodus 26:36)—the entrance to the worship experience. From there, the worshipper would progress into the courts, where the bronze altar and bronze laver were located. The outer court was where the worship experience would proceed with ceremonial washings and sacrifices.

Psalm 100:4 relates a valuable insight into this worship road map, giving us a progression to intimate worship: the gateway is thanksgiving, and the next step is praise. We begin by expressing gratefulness to God for what He has done. Such thankfulness opens the gate to God’s presence. Developing a habit of thankfulness is critical to cultivating a truly worshipful heart. We cannot authentically worship God if we are not thankful. This is Erickson’s observation:

If someone has difficulty in really being able to praise the Lord it could be that he is not genuinely grateful. Perhaps some disappointment or severe trial of life has left him a little embittered. But we cannot move any farther in praise and worship until we are thankful. (Erickson 1989, 41)

Moving beyond thanksgiving, worship progresses with praise. Praise acknowledges who God is, what He has done, and the greatness of His nature. The expression of praise turns our focus away from ourselves and onto God, the object of our worship. Praise is not silent or internal, and it is not a feeling or an attitude. Praise is an outward response to the glory and majesty of God. Like worshippers in the Tabernacle centuries ago, we enter the gates and progress through the courts before coming into God’s presence. Thanksgiving and praise usher us into the Most Holy Place.

The Tabernacle Restored

The prophet Amos, a simple shepherd in Israel, received the word of the Lord for His people. It was a terrifying word of judgment. Because of the sin of the people and its leaders, God was bringing swift and certain judgment. It would not be long before captivity and judgment would come. But God also gave a beautiful promise to His faithful worshippers:

“In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent, I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,” declares the Lord, who will do these things. (Amos 9:11–12)

***Explain how tabernacle worship was restored
in the book of Acts***

Years later, Israel was taken captive. Jerusalem itself was captured. The people scattered. But the faithful held on to God’s promise.

**How was tabernacle worship
restored in the book of Acts?**

God’s promise was finally fulfilled in Jesus and was affirmed by the apostles in Acts 15. The early church leaders recognized that, in Jesus, God was restoring His worshipping people. In addition, He was calling the Gentiles to be worshippers along with the Jews (Amos 9:12; Acts 15:19). But this Tabernacle worship was all new because in this new tent that God was building, all believers would be priests (1 Peter 2:9; Hebrews 4:16; Matthew 27:51). The Spirit of God would dwell in a temple of flesh rather than stone (1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16). Salvation would be for all people (John 3:16). Today we can be confident that Tabernacle worship has indeed been restored and, as New Testament believers, we are part of God’s building.

10.3

Lesson 10.3 Worship in the Psalms

Worship from the Heart

Most of us have made many friends over the years. One of the great joys of my life has been developing close friendships and living in authentic community with other believers. Some friends grow closer than others because we tend to gravitate towards people who love the same things we love. For instance, when I was young, my mother would sometimes say, “You are a boy after my own heart” during the moments that I expressed appreciation for the things that she loved and prioritized.

Why was David referred to as *a man after God’s own heart*?

Indicate why David was called a man after God’s own heart in Acts 13:22.

God referred to David as a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22; 1 Samuel 13:14). Why? David loved what God loved. As a young man tending his father’s sheep, David developed a deep respect for courage, truth, justice, and for God himself. David’s musical skill must have developed as he sang the psalms of praise he composed for God. In fact, his musical skill (and certainly his worshipful heart) enabled him to comfort King Saul in Saul’s times of torment. David courageously defended the character of God when the Philistines confronted Israel and Goliath blasphemed God. When the ark was returned to Israel under his leadership, David danced with such abandon that it invited the scorn of his own wife. It seemed that nothing could quench this young man’s passion for worshipping the God he loved—not fear, not intimidation, not scorn. David loved what God loved, and he worshipped Him with all of his heart.

David's later years were marred by the grave consequences of sin, but still he worshipped. "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me," David pleaded (Psalm 51:10–11). When his nation was plunged into war, David worshipped. "The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock," David sang:

Exalted be God, the Rock, my Savior! He is the God who avenges me, who puts the nations under me, who sets me free from my enemies. You exalted me above my foes; from violent men you rescued me. Therefore I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing praises to your name. (2 Samuel 22:47–50)

David's last recorded words acknowledged the God who gave him success. A worshipper to the end, David was referred to as "Israel's singer of songs" (2 Samuel 23:1).

What an inspiration David is to worshippers today. People all over the world use David's songs to worship God. People everywhere are inspired and comforted by David's descriptions of the majesty and the mercy of God. But David's example calls us even deeper: it calls us to worship that goes beyond words and poetry. Like David, we are called to be people after God's own heart, people who love what He loves.

Worship in all Circumstances

*Demonstrate how the book of Psalms affirms
worship in joy and sorrow.*

In our humanness, we may find it easier to praise God in some seasons of our lives than in others. My wife and I recently returned from a vacation in Hawaii, and the day we were to fly from the islands I found myself repeating, "Thank you, Lord, for this beautiful place. Thank you, Lord, for this opportunity to spend time alone with my wife." In that tropical paradise, praise rolled off my tongue. Now, however, I am back at home, laboring at the hard work of ministry. The skies are winter gray, a cold wind is blowing, and it seems that troubled people are always at my door. Today, praise is not coming as easily as it did just a few short weeks ago.

How does the book of Psalms challenge us to worship God on every occasion?

The Psalms challenge me to praise in every situation and location, however. You do not have to read far into the Psalter to discover that the psalmists understood God was worthy to be praised regardless of the circumstances they found themselves in. Theologians today group the Psalms into many categories—praise psalms, lament psalms, enthronement psalms, wisdom psalms, creation psalms, and penitential psalms to name just a few—but the common theme in all the psalms is that God is worthy to be praised in all types of human circumstances. Consider Psalm 13, a lament psalm:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

**How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?**

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.

**Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.**

**But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.**

**I will sing to the Lord,
for he has been good to me.**

In this psalm, the writer is facing a situation that has brought him to great despair. The repeated words “how long” intensify the emotion as we read through the psalm. However, even though the psalmist feels that God has forgotten him and that his enemies will soon rejoice over his destruction, he remembers the goodness of the Lord, and vows to praise

Him. This psalm reminds us that God is faithful regardless of how desperate we feel and that He is worthy of our worship even when it seems He has forgotten us.

The psalms call us to worship on every occasion. When we are astounded by the glory of God’s creation we can sing with the psalmist, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens” (Psalm 8:1). When we need wisdom we can assert with the psalmist, “I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws” (Psalm 119:7). When we need forgiveness, we can pray with the psalmist, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51:1–2). In all of life’s circumstances we are called to worship the Lord.

10.4

Lesson 10.4 Jesus’ Teaching on Worship

Revolutionary Worship

Periodically in human history there are events that can truly be called revolutionary in the sense that these events change the course of human history and experience. You have probably learned about the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution, among others. All of these periods of time changed the course of life for the people on planet earth.

In my lifetime, I have experienced the changes brought on by the computer revolution. When I was an undergraduate student in college, I took a typing class in a small classroom filled with a dozen or so old manual typewriters and a few electric typewriters that the students who got to class early would snap up. In 1992 I bought my first computer, a Macintosh laptop with a whopping 40 megabytes of hard drive space. The stunning black-and-white screen dazzled my friends who were still using the old black screens with the green-flashing curser. Today’s computers are lightning fast with memory measured in gigs and screens that are growing ever bigger and flatter and more realistic in their color reproduction. These

computers have revolutionized the way we do everything from word processing to photography to information gathering. I have indeed lived through a revolution. I cannot imagine going back to those old manual typewriters (or the white correction fluid they required).

Explain why Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well was revolutionary.

In John 4, Jesus had a conversation with a Samaritan woman that revolutionized her life and the lives of generations of Christ-followers to come. In Jesus' day, the conventional wisdom alleged that God accepted worship only from people whose purity of morals, gender, ethnicity, and locale all aligned to adequately please Him. Jewish rabbis in particular embodied this spiritual elitism, and Jews and Gentiles alike stood in awe of their piety. So when Jesus sat down by a well in Sychar, asked for water, and had a conversation with a woman from the despised Samaritan race, He started a worship revolution.

Why was Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well so revolutionary?

Why was this conversation revolutionary? First, a man of Jesus' stature would never have carried on a conversation with a woman in public. Second, a Jewish rabbi would never have defiled himself by drinking water drawn by a Samaritan. Third, this woman's lifestyle was so immoral that she was likely shunned even by the other women of her own town and certainly by holy men (Tenney 1981, 54). By entering into a meaningful conversation with this woman, Jesus was exploding gender barriers, racial barriers, and ethical barriers. By inviting this immoral, non-Jewish *woman* to become a worshipper of God was nothing less than revolutionary.

The apostle Paul also exploded the barriers that traditional Judaism had erected against would-be worshippers when he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ

Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28–29). Because of the sacrifice of Christ, all people—male or female, Jew or Gentile, righteous and unrighteous—are invited to be washed in the blood of Christ and bow before the throne of God. This is Jesus’ worship revolution.

Worship in Spirit and Truth

Analyze the meaning behind Jesus’ statement in John 4:23 that God is seeking worshippers who “will worship the Father in spirit and in truth”

What do Jesus’ actions say about who can or cannot worship God?

The Samaritan woman was understandably skeptical of this man who was asking her for water in the middle of the day. After some dialogue, Jesus finally broke through her skepticism with a prophetic statement regarding her marital status. Suddenly convinced that Jesus was much more than just a normal man, she diverted the conversation to the common religious argument of where to worship. Unwilling to be drawn into a fruitless discussion, Jesus got right to the point:

Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:21–24)

The classic debate had been whether or not God would receive worship from various locales. Suddenly Jesus had turned the tables. Worship is not about where you worship; it is not about how you worship necessarily; and it is not even about your worthiness to worship. The worship the Father is seeking is worship in *spirit* and in *truth*.

What does it mean to worship “in spirit and in truth”?

What does it mean to worship in spirit? When I worship God with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength (Morgenthaler 1999, 47), I am worshipping God rightly. Sally Morgenthaler calls this worshipping with a right spirit, and this is the worship God is seeking (Morgenthaler 1999, 47).

What does it mean to worship in truth? When I “celebrate God’s saving deed in Jesus Christ” (Webber 1994), I am worshipping in truth. Christian worship is focused on Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, the perfect sacrifice that redeems fallen people and reconciles them to the Father. This too is the worship God is seeking.

Worshipping in spirit and truth, then, involves both expressions of praise flowing from our inmost beings and a clear focus on the truth revealed through Jesus Christ. Worshipping in spirit and truth is neither exclusively emotional nor solely doctrinal. It involves coming to the Father through the truth of Jesus and offering our whole beings to Him as offerings of worship. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

10.5 Lesson 10.5 Worship in Heaven

Many people look forward to heaven primarily for the tangible benefits they will receive there. They are focused on reunions with loved ones, release from present suffering, and the delights of heaven—the streets of God, pearly gates, angelic music. But although the Bible affirms that all of these things will be present in heaven, it appears that all these things are secondary to the priority of heaven: worship.

***Relate the primary activity of heaven as
described in Revelation***

In the book of Revelation, the apostle John is shown an open door leading into heaven, and he is invited to see what is to take place in the future. The vision is stunning: John sees the Lord seated on a throne in all His dazzling glory surrounded by the elders on their thrones and the seven spirits of God and a crystal sea of glass. Four “living creatures” are also present—amazing beings each with a unique figure—worshipping God on His throne, saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (Revelation 4:8).

The elders respond to the song of the living creatures by falling before the throne, laying down their crowns, and saying, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Revelation 4:11).

**How do we know that the primary activity
in heaven will be worship?**

Notice that the first thing John sees on entering the heavenly realm is worship! As the vision continues, the Lamb is declared worthy to open the scroll, and worship erupts again. This time John sees the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, tens of thousands of angels, and “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and on the sea, and all that is in them” (Revelation 5:13) begin to sing praise to God and to the Lamb. From this moment on, the descriptions of worship do not end. Whenever something significant happens in John’s vision, all of heaven resounds in worship, singing the high praises of God.

Time and space do not allow us to comment on every passage in Revelation that describes the worship in heaven, but as we read the songs in John’s vision, our hearts are stirred. We long for the day when we will stand before the throne and worship God with the redeemed and the

multitudes of angels. Of course, we will be reunited with our loved ones in that place, and we will be released from suffering. Our surroundings will be of unsurpassed beauty, but those things will not be our focus. Worshipping the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb will be our focus.

When I think of our glorious future of worshipping the Lord for all eternity, a song rises in my heart. I sing with the heavenly host, “Amen, praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength, *be* to our God forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 7:12, emphasis added).

Chapter 11: Gathered for Worship: Worship in the Church

A number of years ago a family in our church criticized many of our ministries and vehemently disagreed with much of what our lead pastor was teaching. Our leaders met with the family and tried their best to maintain unity in the fellowship, but the family decided that their disagreements necessitated leaving the church.

This sometimes happens in many churches, and in most situations pastors learn to bless people as they leave and pray that they will be cared for in another fellowship. However, this situation was different. This family decided that they would practice what has become known as *home church*. This family withdrew from the larger body of Christ to stand alone against the world in their devotion to God. Sadly, while they were asserting their devotion to scriptural truth and holy living, they were deceived by a common misconception: that other Christians are completely unnecessary to the spiritual health of a worshipper. This is not true.

While you and I may often worship meaningfully in solitude, biblical worship also includes worship in the gathered community. This chapter will discuss the necessity and value of gathered worship and offer biblical instruction on how to conduct great worship services.

Lesson 11.1 Coming Together for Worship

Objectives

11.1.1 Define the Greek word ekklesia, and explain its theological connection to gathered worship.

11.1.2 Define the Greek word koinonia, and explain its theological connection to gathered worship.

11.1.3 Summarize the necessity of unity in gathered worship.

Lesson 11.2 God, the Object of Worship

Objectives

11.2.1 Identify the distractions that can turn gathered worship into idolatry.

11.2.2 Clarify the danger of self-preoccupation in gathered worship.

Lesson 11.3 Worship and Music

Objectives

11.3.1 Give biblical definitions for the terms psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

11.3.2 Identify the criteria that determine a good text for a worship song.

11.3.3 Identify the criteria that determine a good tune for a worship song.

11.3.4 List the responsibilities of a good lead worshipper.

Lesson 11.4 Worship and Physical Expressions

Objectives

11.4.1 Analyze the ways in which physical expressions of worship can help us love God more completely.

11.4.2 Explore the significance of worshipping the Lord through the ordinances of water baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Lesson 11.5 Worship in the Spirit

Objectives

11.5.1 Explain why supernatural manifestations are important elements of biblical worship.

11.5.2 Explain why glossolalic expressions are valuable for both personal worship and for the gathered community.

Lesson 11.6 Worship and the Arts

Objectives

11.6.1 Describe the biblical and historical importance of art in worship.

11.6.2 Analyze the biblical priority on skillful art in the worship of God.

11.6.3 Apply the biblical and historical significance of art in worship to the contemporary church.

11.1	Lesson 11.1 Coming Together for Worship
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Worshipping in *Ekklesia*

A PBS television special called “Christmas in Yellowstone” chronicled the work of a renowned photographer who snowshoes through Yellowstone National Park every winter, camping in the sub-zero weather to photograph the landscape and wildlife in its winter environment. During the interview, the photographer remarked, “This is my sanctuary.” I do not know if this man is a Christian, but his remark highlights another misconception that many people espouse: that getting alone in nature to worship the Creator is an acceptable alternative to gathered worship. It is not.

Define the Greek word ekklesia, and explain its theological connection to gathered worship.

What does the term *ekklesia* mean?

One of the primary words used in the New Testament to describe the fellowship of believers is *ekklesia*. This was a word commonly used to describe any assembly of people gathered for some organizational meeting or even by chance. However, Jesus used the word *ekklesia*, as did the apostles, to describe the community of Christians as a distinct worshipping fellowship. This word describes assemblies that meet together for religious rites as well as the body of Christians that has been scattered around the world. It also refers to those Christians who have already gone to be with the Lord.

What is the significance of Jesus using the term *ekklesia* to describe the gathering of Christians for worship?

The significance of this term is tremendous. Jesus expected that His followers would unite in fellowship to worship God *together*. The apostles traveled throughout Europe and Asia, not only preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, but planting churches—gathered groups of believers. While the earliest churches did indeed meet in homes, they were not secluded individuals or family units conducting worship services in isolation. To be a follower of Jesus Christ and a worshipper of God is to worship in a gathered community, the *ekklesia*.

In his corrective letter to the church at Corinth, Paul addressed many of the abuses of the early Christians who had fallen into disagreement over the exercise of spiritual gifts. One of these abuses regarded this idea that a true worshipper of Christ can worship in isolation. Paul wrote,

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ... But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, *and each one of you is a part of it.* (1 Corinthians 12:21, 24–27, emphasis added)

If we are going to worship God in spirit and in truth, then, we must understand that this includes worshipping in the gathered community. While we do indeed practice those spiritual disciplines which take place in solitude, we must also prioritize the rhythm of coming out of our homes and gathering with other believers to worship the Lord.

Worshipping in *Koinonia*

Another very important Greek word for the gathered community is *koinonia*. This word, usually translated “fellowship,” does not occur as often in Scripture as *ekklesia* does, but its significance to our study is profound. *Koinonia* means “to share, to have commonality, or to commune with other people” (Vine 1985, 233). The word also implies a participation in the lives of other people that leads to intimacy (Thayer 1999). Jack Hayford says that *koinonia* “cements the believers to the Lord Jesus and to each other” (Hayford 1995, 611–612).

Define the Greek word koinonia, and explain its theological connection to gathered worship.

What does the word *koinonia* mean?

Koinonia is rooted in the nature of God himself. As the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), God lives in community. Believers are called to reflect the nature of God by living and worshipping in *koinonia* with one another. John writes,

What does *koinonia* with other Christians have to do with our relationship with God?

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship (*koinonia*) with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship (*koinonia*) with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:5–7)

Through the gift of Jesus Christ, we are welcomed into the community (*koinonia*) that God enjoys in the Trinity. This fellowship with the Godhead then brings us into community (*koinonia*) with other believers. Paul opened his first epistle to the Corinthians with an appeal to *koinonia*:

God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:9–10)

When worshippers abandon their grip on individualistic expressions and gather to worship with one another in the spirit of *koinonia*, God is truly honored in the assembly of saints.

These wonderful Greek words paint a glorious vision of a community of believers gathered for worship: It is a group of Christ-followers who have abandoned their individualistic worship ideals and are enjoying one another's fellowship as they glorify the Lord. They are more concerned with one another than they are with themselves, and each participates enthusiastically and joyfully, submitting to one another in the spirit of love. No one is left out, and no one is refusing to participate. The lead worshippers are not performing for the congregation's edification; rather, they are facilitating the free-flow of Spirit-led worship. If more churches enjoyed this kind of worship in the spirit of *koinonia* and *ekklesia*, imagine how God would be glorified, how believers would grow, and how the world

would be attracted to the cause of Christ. We desperately need to worship in true koinonia.

Missing Koinonia

One of the reasons for such great success among televangelists is that most denominational church services are just a performance by a few. The congregation assembles to sit in a detached and passive manner. They watch and listen to a handful of people do religious things. Therefore, staying at home and watching a televised church service instead of actually attending a service is not really very different ... In most cases the televised program is more professional and entertaining.

—Gary D. Erickson, 1989, 97.

Worshipping in Unity

This vision of gathered worship is dependent on believers living in unity with one another. Sadly, many churches have become divided over the issues of musical styles, volume levels, and appropriate instrumentations. As a result of these so-called worship wars, some churches today look more like the church at Corinth, with worshippers jostling for power and preeminence in the church. We may not be fighting over who can speak in tongues the loudest or longest, but our attitudes have come to reflect those of the Corinthians. They reflected an attitude that said, “Because you are not like me, I do not need you.”

Summarize the necessity of unity in gathered worship.

While Paul brought correction to the Corinthian church for its disunity, he congratulated the church at Ephesus for its impressive demonstration of unity in diversity. He had spent over two years in Ephesus establishing the church there, and it was comprised of both Jews and Gentiles—groups that were typically alienated from one another in the cultures of that day. He encouraged them to prioritize their unity as the family of God. “This

mystery is that through the gospel Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus,” he wrote (Ephesians 3:6). Paul appealed to the triune nature of God himself to argue that Christians should also embrace unity in their diversity. “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4–6). He taught that the gifts of leadership in the church should be used to move the church to unity and maturity (Ephesians 4:11–13).

How does the unity of gathered worship
reflect the nature of God?

The gathered body of Christ today cannot afford to succumb to the divisive outcomes of arguments and self-promotions. We must stand with Paul in his affirmation of unity. Eugene Peterson humorously paraphrases (in *The Message Bible*) Paul’s argument for unity in 1 Corinthians 12:14–18:

A body isn’t just a single part blown up into something huge. It’s all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, “I’m not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don’t belong to this body,” would that make it so? If Ear said, “I’m not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don’t deserve a place on the head,” would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

Gathered worship must encompass the entire body in all its beautiful diversity worshipping God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in all His beautiful diversity. As a unified whole, we come together to celebrate the saving grace of Jesus and exalt the God who called us out of the world and into His family.

11. 2	Lesson 11.2 God, the Object of Worship
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Idolatry: Identifying Worship Distractions

I love to visit churches other than my own. Whenever we are traveling away from home, my wife and I make it a habit to visit churches not only to worship, but also to observe how other fellowships are *doing church*. I observe the worship services carefully, hoping to glean valuable ideas both from what is done well and from what is done poorly.

However, this critical approach to church attendance makes it very difficult for me to worship God. I find that, as a classically trained musician, if the music in a church service is poor, I get distracted—even annoyed—and do not focus on the Lord. If the music is skillfully performed, I have a similar problem. I find myself listening intently and analyzing the interaction of the musicians, the technology, and the musical arrangements and, again, I do not focus on the Lord. Instead of worshipping God, who should be the object of worship, I focus my attention on the mechanics of the worship service.

Identify the distractions that can turn gathered worship into idolatry.

The following discussion draws on the work of theologian Marva Dawn (1995), where Dawn refers to worship distractions as *idols*. Although this language provides stark and effective contrast for the sake of illustrating profound truth about worship, this use of the word *idol* may be confusing. Dawn uses *idol* to identify things that divert from God those things that rightfully belong to Him, such as our loyalty, service, adoration, and obedience. Since we do not consciously and actively ascribe worship to

these things, nor do we expect power or benefit from them, we may not understand why she identifies them as idols.

However, one of these distractions mentioned is *efficiency*. Dawn (1995) identifies the temptation to accommodate our culture's hurry as an idol for many churches. She writes,

According to Marva Dawn, what distractions can turn gathered worship into idolatry?

Society's push for efficiency has robbed most congregations of the Sabbath rhythm, the setting apart of one day in every seven for ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting, a whole day set apart for God and for each other, a day of delight and healing ... In that rhythm, we don't have to rush out of the worship service at precisely noon, since there is no work to do on Sunday" (Dawn 1995, 43).

If we allow ourselves to be distracted by the idol of efficiency, we have neglected the God who is the object of our worship.

Another distraction Dawn identifies is *traditionalism*. Churches that exist only to preserve their heritage or to replicate the experiences of its members' pasts have succumbed to the idolatry of traditionalism. When we keep God as the object of our worship, we will focus on what will truly bring Him glory and honor, avoiding the error of planning services for the sake of pleasing the congregation. Of course, attention must also be paid to ways in which the congregation will be led in worship—one cannot ignore the congregational response in planning worship—but the focus should always be on what will please God, not on what will please people. If we allow ourselves to be distracted by the idol of traditionalism, we have neglected the God who is the object of our worship.

Yet another distraction Dawn identifies is what she calls the *idolatry of famous people*. Western culture has become obsessively preoccupied with celebrities and their lifestyles, and the same preoccupation has infected many churches. This distraction manifests itself whenever churches rely on the *star power* of gifted people to offer worship to God in the form of music or preaching. People who attend churches that have succumbed to this

idolatry do not participate in worship, but rather they become idle observers to the show that is being performed on the platform. These churches rely on glitz, spectacle, and technological toys to attract people from the surrounding culture, but authentic worship of God—the One for whom worship exists—is replaced by passive observation. If we allow ourselves to be distracted by the idol of famous people, we have neglected God who is the object of our worship.

Yet another idol that Dawn mentions is that of *numbers and success*. While all Bible-believing churches should embrace the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) as their responsibility to Jesus, they should also remember that God ordained the church for worship: “To [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Ephesians 3:21). While evangelism is non-negotiable for churches who are following Jesus, simply pursuing numbers of people who have “said the prayer” and measuring the success of the church by numbers and budget figures is, as Marva Dawn observes, idolatry, unless the end result of such evangelistic efforts is to change irreligious people into worshippers of the most high God. Churches must remember that “worship is for God. Only! The chief aim of worship is to please God—whether by adoration and praise, prayer and proclamation, confessions and offerings, thanksgivings and commitment, or by all of these actions combined” (Gaddy, quoted in Dawn 1995, 80). In the end, the purpose of worship is to acknowledge that “God alone matters” (Gaddy, quoted in Dawn 1995, 80). If we allow ourselves to be distracted by numbers and success, we have neglected the God who is the object of our worship.

Obviously, these are just a few of the distractions that can become idols to us if we lose the focus of worship. I challenge you to regularly consider whether idols of distraction are tempting you. What idols have you seen raised in the churches you have attended? After you have identified these idols, ask God to keep your worship pure and to guard your heart from these distractions.

Idolatry: Casting Down the Idol of Self

Perhaps the most dangerous idol that competes for the worship of God is the idol of *self*. The idol of self can manifest in many forms: a refusal to worship unless the environment is perfect (perfect music, perfect lighting,

perfect people leading worship), a refusal to worship unless our needs are met (not singing unless we like the songs that are chosen, an intolerance for other worship styles), a refusal to worship unless we feel like it (a dependence on emotions rather than an obedience to the call to worship), and many others. Whenever I willfully refuse to worship because I am preoccupied with my own feelings or preferences, the idol of self has vaunted itself in God's holy temple.

Clarify the danger of self-preoccupation in gathered worship.

There is real danger here, because gods who have stood in the place of Yahweh have historically not fared well. Consider the Philistine god, Dagon. After Israel had suffered devastating defeat at the hands of the Philistine army, the ark of the Lord was captured and taken to Ashdod, home of the temple of Dagon. There the Philistines carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside the idol. The next day when the people came to worship, they found their god lying face down, fallen on his face before the ark of the Lord. The next morning, after having set Dagon in place again, they found their god once again prostrate before the Lord, this time with his head and hands broken off. Not long after this, the people of Ashdod were afflicted with tumors—the judgment of God. When they realized that the God of Israel was bringing such devastation upon them and upon their god, they moved the ark out of their country (1 Samuel 5).

The lesson to be learned here is clear: God will not compete with any gods that we raise in His place. Every idol that distracts us from worshipping Yahweh God will fall face down in His presence. This is particularly dangerous to the idol of self, because if this idol is cast down and broken in pieces in the presence of God, considerable suffering can accompany God's judgment. We are wise to humble ourselves, choosing brokenness in our worship rather than risking God's judgment of breaking us against our will. As worshippers, we must be diligent to avoid erecting the idol of self in the presence of the Lord.

Casting down the idol of self is certainly a challenge to individual worshippers, but it is also a critical issue for corporate worship. The

temptation to tolerate selfishness in the church is ubiquitous. Groups of church members may stubbornly refuse to worship if the worship style does not suit them, while lead worshippers may be equally stubborn in refusing to serve the tastes of those they are leading. However, if worship really is for God and His pleasure only, we will all remember—worshippers as well as lead worshippers—that His glory is all that really matters, and the idol of self will take its place face down along with Dagon and every other god that has ever exalted itself against the Lord.

11.

3

Lesson 11.3 Worship and Music

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

Like many churches around the world, the church in which I minister has undergone significant change over the years in how we use printed music in worship. For decades, our church sang out of hymnals. In the 1970s, our church began printing its own little chorus book, a mimeographed compilation of Scripture songs that had become popular at that time. In the 1980s, we began projecting songs on a screen using an overhead projector and hand-written lyrics on plastic transparencies. Then, when we built a new auditorium in the mid-1990s, we dispensed with all of these printed forms of music, and since then, we have projected the words to our worship music using computers and high quality digital projectors.

Give biblical definitions for the terms psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

During this evolutionary period, it seemed churches everywhere adopted two distinct terms to describe what we were singing. Those terms were *hymns* and *choruses*. Conventional wisdom considered a hymn to be any song that had ever found its way into the hymnals over the centuries, while

a chorus was anything else—particularly if it was new or contemporary. Some of the distinction was due to the fact that in the early days of the praise and worship movement, many of the new songs were simple choruses that had no verses, no variations, and easy-to-sing messages of adoration. A good example of this type of song would be “Father, I adore you / Lay my life before you / How I love you” with words and music by Terrye Coelho (and produced by Maranatha Music in 1972). This short chorus would be repeated again and again substituting “Jesus” and “Spirit” for “Father,” constituting a very simple and sentimental chorus.

Although worship music has grown tremendously in the last twenty-five years—both theologically and in musical complexity—many people still cling to the distinctions of these two terms. Hymns are thought to be the *old stand-bys*, while choruses are any songs written after the 1950s. There is even a kind of elitism regarding chorus singing that can be illustrated by the oft-told story of the self-righteous preacher who raised his hymnal high above his head and railed against the congregation down the street that was singing shallow songs “off the wall.” Many people believe that the old songs are somehow superior to the new for congregational worship. They argue that the classic hymns are deeper in theology than newer songs, that they connect people to their Christian heritage, and that they offer a richer worship expression than the newer songs.

What did the term *psalms* mean to Paul and the early church?

Is this true? Are the classic hymns of the faith superior to songs written in our own generation? To answer this question, let us consider the instructions the apostle Paul gave the churches at Ephesus and Colosse. He admonished both congregations to sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), and he evidently intended that congregational singing in the churches would include all these types of songs. While there is some overlap in the meaning of these terms, there are undoubtedly distinctions in the meanings of “psalms,” “hymns,” and “spiritual songs,” and Paul does not seem to elevate any of the three over the others.

The word *psalms* refers to the songs of the Jewish psalter, which, in Paul's day, was used by the church as a hymnal, as the synagogues had done. Theologian Gordon Fee believes, however, that this term has a broader application than referring exclusively to the Old Testament psalms (Fee 1996, 159). It could certainly apply to the singing of any number of Scripture songs or those having clear allusions to Scripture. Modern examples of psalm-singing would include "As the Deer," a musical setting of Psalm 42 and "Blessed Be Your Name," which borrows from Job's song of worship in Job 1.

What does the Greek term *hymn* mean?

The Greek word translated *hymn* is used to describe songs that were sung in praise of heroes or deities and came to describe the songs that Christians sang to the Lord. In the biblical usage of the word, a hymn is not necessarily an ancient song (and it certainly has nothing to do with being bound in a book), but is instead a praise song. It may be a song sung directly to God, or it may be a song about God, but the distinction is that it is a song focusing on the praise and exaltation of God. Great hymns in the Christian tradition include the "*Magnificat*," Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46–55), Martin Luther's reformation anthem, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," and Chris Tomlin's modern hymn, "Indescribable."

What are *spiritual songs*?

The third term Paul uses, "spiritual songs," is perhaps the most compelling expression Paul describes, and it is quite possibly the type of singing we hear less frequently in modern churches than the others. The Greek term translated "spiritual" is *pneumatikos*, and, according to Fee, in this case, means songs that are birthed by the Spirit. This kind of singing is most likely a charismatic expression of worship that is described in 1 Corinthians 14:15–16 and 26. According to Paul's descriptions, these were

“Spirit-inspired, hence often spontaneous, songs [that] were offered in the context of congregational worship” (Fee 1996, 160). In recent generations, there has been a resurgence of such Spirit-singing. Pentecostal writings from the early twentieth century contain numerous descriptions of the “heavenly chorus,” in which worshippers would harmonize improvised songs in tongues (Wacker 2001, 110). I have personally experienced corporate tongues-singing, Spirit-led singing of spontaneous songs, and the singing of prophetic messages, and they are wonderful worship experiences. On one occasion, I was even prompted by the Spirit to compose a song on the spot that became a worship song we sang in our church for many years. These are all examples of what Paul calls “spiritual songs,” or perhaps better translated, “Spirit songs” (Fee 1996).

A genre of church music that Paul does not mention is the “gospel song” or “testimony song.” These songs are commonly included in modern hymnals, but they do not fit any of Paul’s descriptions. They are songs that celebrate a individual’s personal experiences in the Lord, or they may look forward to the second coming and heaven. Examples would include “I Love to Tell the Story” and “When the Roll is Called up Yonder.” These songs are dearly loved by many saints, but it is important to remember that they are not categorized as worship songs. When planning a worship service, it is important to order testimony songs carefully for appropriate times in the service. For example, you would not want to sandwich “When We All Get to Heaven” between “How Great is Our God” and “How Great Thou Art.” To do so would disrupt the flow of worship and take the focus off the worship of our great God and place it instead on what we are looking forward to experiencing.

With these thoughts in mind, then, as a lead worshipper, I select music carefully, balancing Scripture songs (psalms) with worship songs (hymns), while leaving room for the Spirit to sing through us spontaneously (Spirit songs). I also try to achieve a balance between songs that are familiar to our congregation with those that are new, and I sing some of the classic songs of the faith frequently as well, including testimony songs. It is my prayer that by worshipping in this way our congregation will be “filled with the Spirit” and will “sing and make music in [their hearts] to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:18–20).

The Anatomy of Great Worship Songs—the Text

Identify the criteria that determine a good text for a worship song.

We are all aware that some worship songs have good lyrics and some do not. Leaders need to discern which are which. In my church, we teach only a dozen or so new songs a year, so it is important for me to select only the very best songs for us to sing corporately. This requires understanding the qualities of both a good text and good music.

What three questions must be answered when evaluating worship songs?

We will begin with lyrics. Three questions should be asked when evaluating worship songs. The first is obviously the most important: is the song anchored in biblical truth? As in the previous section, many great worship songs contain lyrics that are taken directly from Scripture. These songs will obviously answer the first question positively (unless the passage is taken out of context). However, many worship songs are paraphrases, and many have no obvious biblical reference at all. Songs that fall into these categories need to be evaluated to ensure that they are indeed anchored in biblical truth and represent a biblical worldview. Those that contain questionable theology or little theology are not worthy of use in corporate worship. A good example of a song that is solidly anchored in biblical truth is David Crowder's "Wholly Yours." The second evaluative question is this: does the song make good use of language? A good worship song will use language that is grammatically correct and clearly understandable. Many songs use archaic language or theological metaphors that are difficult to understand without explanation. If the lyric cannot be clearly understood by the people in my congregation, I generally do not use the song. An example of difficult lyrics is "Days of Elijah" by Robin Mark. This song is very popular, and it is indeed an infectious song of celebration, but the lyrics are difficult to understand for people who do not know the Bible well:

“Behold He comes / riding on the clouds / shining like the sun / at the trumpet call / Lift your voice / it’s the year of Jubilee / out of Zion’s hill salvation comes.” If a person does not know biblical theology, he or she might ask, “What is the year of Jubilee? What is Zion’s hill?” The verses employ vivid metaphors of famine, darkness, and sword fighting along with laboring in the vineyard and reaping a white harvest. While this song is solidly biblical and clearly passes the first test, the language is too difficult, in my opinion, for many people—especially new believers or church visitors—to comprehend.

“Wholly Yours” by David Crowder

**I am full of earth / You are heaven’s
worth**

**I am stained with dirt / prone to
depravity**

**You are everything / that is bright
and clean**

**The antonym of me / You are
divinity**

But a certain sign of grace is this:

**From the broken earth flowers
come up**

Pushing through the dirt.

Chorus:

And you are holy, holy, holy

All heaven cries, “Holy, holy God.”

Oh, You are holy, holy, holy

I want to be holy like You are

**You are everything / that is bright
and clean**

**And You’re covering / me with
Your majesty**

**And the truest sign of grace was
this:**

**That from wounded hands
redemption fell down**

Liberating man.

(Chorus)

**But the harder I try / the more
clearly can I**

What is the PASS formula for evaluating worship texts?

Worship theologian Sally Morgenthaller employs what she calls the “PASS formula” for evaluating worship texts. This formula is an excellent way to evaluate whether or not a song makes good use of language:

- **Personal**—they relate in some way to people’s everyday lives and involve their whole being, including their emotions.
- **Attractive**—they hold people’s attention.
- **Straightforward**—both seeker and saint can understand and latch onto them quickly.
- **Substantive**—they have a thoroughly biblical message that is faithful to the whole counsel of Scripture. (Morgenthaller 1999, 214)

Here is the third question: Are the lyrics poetic? Meter and rhyme are problems that songwriters generally grapple with, but, as lead worshippers, we should also evaluate a song’s poetic beauty. A song that has too many “perfect” rhymes may sound trite or forced, while a song that does not rhyme at all may not be memorable enough to become a great worship song. This question speaks to the interaction of music and lyrics, and there are no hard-and-fast rules. However, good worship songs will have a poetic, transcendent quality that contributes positively to the worship experience.

The Anatomy of Great Worship Songs—the Music

It is as important to evaluate the musical quality of songs as it is to evaluate the text. We should ask three questions of worship songs that relate to their musical quality. First, is the melody singable? A suitable song for congregational singing will generally have a tune that employs stepwise movement and is somewhat limited in its vocal range. The rhythm of the melody should match the natural rhythm of the text, and together the melody and rhythm should be easy enough for most congregational members to sing. In addition, great worship songs have a melodic climax that coincides with the climax of the text. Many Hillsong worship songs are well-crafted in this regard. Songs like “Shout to the Lord” and “Worthy is

the Lamb” are great examples of melodies that are easy-to-sing while being fresh, creative, and emotional. These are songs that will be sung for years to come because they are well-crafted melodies that match excellent lyrics.

Identify the criteria that determine a good tune for a worship song.

A second question leaders should ask is this: does the melody have enough repetition to make it memorable? Songwriters often talk about a song’s *hook* as the key to a memorable song. This is the part of the song (sometimes called the *chorus*) that gets in your brain and keeps you singing all day. Great worship songs generally have an easy-to-remember, repeating phrase that will help worshippers remember it and keep them praising long after they leave a service. Jeff Deyo’s contemporary hymn, “Bless the Lord,” is an example of a song with a great repetitive hook. The song has four verses that extol the virtues of the Lord, and the hook repeats, “bless the Lord, oh my soul, bless the Lord,” varied with “praise the Lord, oh my soul,” and “thank the Lord, oh my soul,” each using the same melodic hook. Songs with good repetition will help us maintain worshipful spirits.

What three questions must be answered to determine the musical quality of a worship song?

A third question we should ask is this: does this song have a timeless quality? The best worship songs will live through generations. Every generation has its own music, and Christian music has seasons as well. I grew up singing “Pass It On,” and “Heaven Came Down and Glory Filled my Soul,” but these songs are anchored in the musical culture of the 1970s and are rarely sung today. However, there are timeless worship songs that continue to be sung. Songs like “Amazing Grace,” “How Great Thou Art,” “The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power,” and “As the Deer” are older songs that are still sung today in churches everywhere. Some songs being written today are equally as timeless: “You are My King” (“Amazing Love”) and “Come, Now is the Time to Worship” are likely to live on because they have

a timeless quality that transcends the period in which they were written. On the other hand, songs like “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever” and “Breathe” probably will fade in popularity simply because over time they will sound dated. As a lead worshipper, I include some songs that suit the current popular culture, but I try to concentrate on singing songs that are truly timeless.

The Lead Worshipper

We have all been in church services in which the lead musician makes prolonged comments about some revelation he or she had recently or about why the congregation needs to worship more enthusiastically. After five or ten minutes of mis-timed sermonizing, I usually find myself longing move on to worship, to connect with God. If we are leading the congregation in worship, we should truly desire to honor and glorify God. It is imperative that we understand what our responsibilities are—and what they are not.

What are the three responsibilities of a good lead worshipper?

List the responsibilities of a good lead worshipper.

The first responsibility is to understand the primary role of the lead worshipper. Notice I did not say *worship leader*, but rather *lead worshipper*. This is a term that songwriter Matt Redman uses to define his role in taking people with him into God’s presence (Redman 2001, 58). According to Redman, there are three implications to being a lead worshipper. First, being a lead worshipper reduces the pressure leaders feel because they realize that “we can’t make worship happen” (Redman 2001, 58). We can only rely on the leading of God’s Spirit to bring results. Second, lead worshippers will understand that they are wholly dependent on God—not just on their musical skills or abilities to manipulate people’s emotions. Third, being a lead worshipper helps a person to understand that not all worship must come from the platform. There may be some in a

congregation who will be prompted to express themselves in worship in a fresh and creative way. Good lead worshippers understand that they are not worship directors, dictating the way everyone must worship. Instead, they are simply the worship instigators, worship facilitators, and the first ones to say, “Come, now is the time to worship!”

A second responsibility of lead worshippers is to develop excellent musical skills. While we have said that we can—and should—be able to worship God regardless of our environment, the pragmatic truth here is that bad music can disrupt a congregation’s move to spiritual intimacy. Good lead worshippers should develop musical skill on their instruments and in their vocals. They need to learn how to flow seamlessly from one song to another; they should also learn how to change keys smoothly. Great musicians are not necessarily great lead worshippers; however, great lead worshippers should always be developing musical skill. If you are called to lead worship, devote time, energy, and resources to developing your musical craft.

A third responsibility of lead worshippers is to know when to quit talking. When you lead, it is often enough to simply worship God yourself. You do not need to prepare a three-point sermon on why the congregation should join you. You do not need to browbeat people into clapping enthusiastically. Just worship, and invite others to join you. If you feel the need to talk, perhaps lead in a short prayer of worship, or invite the congregation to read a responsive psalm that is focused on God and His glory. If you feel you need to exhort the congregation to worship, keep it short, keep it interesting, and avoid clichés. I have found that sometimes the moments of silence that feel awkward to me are often the times that God is doing the deepest work in another worshipper’s heart. Above all, as a lead worshipper, simply try to get out of the way so that people can focus on the Lord.

11.4

Lesson 11.4 Worship and Physical Expressions

Worship from the Outside In

I come from traditional, northern European stock. My father's family immigrated to the U.S. from Germany by way of Russia in the early twentieth century, and some of my mother's family came to Montana from Sweden by way of Minnesota. All of my grandparents came to know the Lord as young adults, and they all experienced Pentecost in the early years of its expansion throughout North America. However, as transformational as their conversions were, their Scandinavian conservatism persists in my generation, and it impacts my worship. While I love God with all of my heart, all of my soul, and all of my mind, loving Him with all of my strength (as in physical expressions) still feels uncomfortable at times. Yet, worshipping God physically is something that I know God calls me to do. I have learned from the Scripture and from experience that when I worship God with my body—as the Bible calls me to do—quite often worship moves from the outside in. Bob Rognlien (2005) writes, “When we learn to worship God physically, we discover that our bodies can help our hearts, souls, and minds to love God more completely.”

Analyze the ways in which physical expressions of worship can help us love God more completely.

Why is this true? One of the reasons is that God created us to communicate both verbally and nonverbally. What does physical worship communicate? One of the most common physical worship expressions is lifting our hands. We lift our hands for many reasons. Children lift their hands when they want to be held by a parent; police order suspects to raise their hands in surrender; we lift our hands in order to receive something. One physical act communicates so many different messages, and all can be applied to worship. When I lift my hands to worship, I intentionally communicate something to God through my posture. Something happens in my spirit that carries me to the next level of worship. This is the power of worshipping physically.

What are some of the physical ways to show God love, and what do they signify?

Kneeling is another physical act that communicates a powerful message. Throughout history, people knelt in the presence of a noble or king to communicate humility and submission to authority. Psalm 95:6 calls us to “Bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.” The psalmist calls us to kneel in the presence of the One who made us, He who is Lord and Creator. When we kneel in His presence we communicate to Him that we acknowledge His authority over our lives. My most intimate times of surrender to the Lord have come when I am on my knees. Something moves from my body inward to my spirit, and I move into a new level of worship.

Another beautiful physical expression of worship is dancing. Psalm 149:3 calls us to “Praise his name with dancing, [making] music to him with tambourine and harp.” Dancing has been used to communicate many things from the beginning of human history. People dance in celebration, they dance to communicate love, and they dance to entertain an audience. Each expression has a place for the worshipper as well. Worshipers who will answer the call to worship with their bodies can celebrate God’s goodness in the dance; they can express their passion for the Lover of their soul and honor Him. This is the power of physical expression in worship.

Other physical expressions of worship include clapping, shouting, worshipping with instruments, lying prostrate, or worshipping in tongues. These all draw us to greater intimacy with the Lord. To love God with only our heart or only our soul or only our mind is to miss the richness of loving Him with all of who we are—heart, soul, mind, *and* strength.

Worshipping by Enactment

In addition to the physical expressions of worship discussed in the previous section, the Bible calls believers to various kinds of worship events that some writers call “enactments.” An enactment is “the practice of acting out certain landmarks of the Christian faith. In this type of worship we retell the gospel story by collective demonstration in language and drama”

(Erickson 1989, 129). Enactments originated in the Old Testament with the seven feasts, the weekly Sabbath, and the year of jubilee. In the New Testament, we see this tradition being carried on through the enactments of water baptism and the Lord's Supper, among others. In the Pentecostal tradition, these two enactments are considered *ordinances*, meaning “an outward ceremony the Lord has directed the church to observe.” These two observances, however, are not meaningless ceremonies we participate in simply because Christ commanded it. They are actually significant physical expressions of worship to the Lord.

Explore the significance of worshipping the Lord through the ordinances of water baptism and the Lord's Supper.

How is water baptism a physical act of worshipping God?

In water baptism, a believer is actually acting out (hence, the “enactment”) the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and communicating to God and all who are observing that he or she is identifying with Christ. Romans 6:4 says, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” The act of going under the water demonstrates the believer's participation in the death of Christ, and the act of being raised out of the water demonstrates the participation in His resurrection. In worship, water baptism is an act of obedience, a commitment to living a resurrected life, an offering of gratitude to the Savior, and a witness to the world.

What does participating in the Lord's Supper signify or express?

In the Lord's Supper, believers are acting out the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus. Paul described it this way:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:23–26)

In drinking the cup, worshippers physically communicate that they are receiving the atoning blood of Jesus as a cleansing for sin. In eating the bread, worshippers physically communicate that they are receiving the broken body of Jesus for the healing of our brokenness (see Isaiah 53:5). In worship, the Lord’s Supper is an act of contrition, a statement of faith, and a means of expressing gratitude to the Savior.

I have attended services where the ordinances of water baptism or the Lord’s Supper are conducted with little thought or worshipfulness. I have heard people chuckle during a baptismal service and have seen others reading a bulletin. We should participate in this powerful worship enactment. Sometimes the Lord’s Supper is tacked on the end of a service like an obligatory ritual that is rushed through and thoughtlessly conducted. Let us take these two physical expressions of worship very seriously and, during these two ordinances, concentrate on worshipping the Lord throughout this reenacting of the gospel story. If you are a pastor or lay leader of a ministry, carefully plan these ordinances and give them adequate time to be meaningful worship experiences for your congregation. These physical forms of worship are given to us by the Lord to be a means of significant worship. Let us celebrate them reverently and meaningfully as we tell the story through our worship.

11.5	Lesson 11.5 Worship in the Spirit
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Supernatural Worship

I have had the privilege of worshipping with Christians all over the United States, Canada, and in several nations around the world. I am

always intrigued by the different styles of worship I experience, and I am always curious about the traditions of Christians in other places, cultures, or denominational streams. I believe that I can always learn something when I worship away from my home church; however, the point of worship is not learning. The point of worship is connecting with God and bringing Him glory. Without a doubt, the times I have felt connected with God most profoundly have been those in which I have experienced the supernatural power of God in the worship service.

Explain why supernatural manifestations are important elements of biblical worship.

In the Old Testament, worship was often accompanied by displays of God's power. In Exodus 33 we read that when Moses went into the tent of meeting, God's presence manifested in a pillar of cloud, and all the people stood and worshipped. In 1 Samuel 10, after Samuel had anointed Saul to be king, he directed him to go to Gilgal to worship. In the process, the Spirit of God came upon Saul, and he prophesied under the Spirit's anointing. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to provide evidence that their god was the true God. After the prophets failed to produce a response from Baal, Elijah prepared the altar of the Lord and soaked it with water. When the sacrifice was prepared and Elijah called out to God, fire fell from heaven and the sacrifice was consumed along with the wood, the stones, the soil, and all the water. In 1 Chronicles 22, we read that King David set apart a group of men to be lead worshippers in the temple. In addition to ministering before the Lord with music, they also prophesied under the power of the Spirit. In 2 Chronicles 7:1–3, after Solomon dedicated the glorious temple he had built to the Lord,

Fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "He is good; his love endures forever.

The people of God have always been profoundly changed whenever they encounter the supernatural manifestations of the presence of God.

In the New Testament, worshippers frequently encountered the supernatural when they worshipped the Lord. The first worshippers of the baby Jesus encountered manifestations of angels and supernatural signs in the heavens. Acts 2 tells us that the early disciples experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit with its accompanying signs as they were worshipping together on the day of Pentecost. We also read that the early Christians frequently experienced miraculous signs and many wonders and that they were all filled with awe as they met together to worship. Paul's writings to the church in Corinth indicates that supernatural manifestations were common during their worship services, and he encouraged them to seek diversity in the exercise of their spiritual gifts. In Revelation 1, the apostle John tells us that he experienced miraculous revelations and visitations of heavenly beings as he worshipped in exile on the island of Patmos. In the New Testament, like the Old, worshippers were transformed when God met them through the power of the Spirit and manifested himself among them.

What is the significance of supernatural manifestations in biblical worship?

These revelations of the power of God were undoubtedly a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth:

**The dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”
(Revelation 21:3–4)**

Just as the people of God have taken comfort in the manifestations of His presence in their worship and have looked forward to the day when God's presence among His people would be restored, we too can experience the miraculous as we worship today. It is just a little bit of heaven on earth.

Tongues in Worship

One of the distinctive manifestations of the Spirit that was poured out on New Testament believers was speaking in tongues, or *glossolalia*. Worshipping God using this Spirit language is a valuable ingredient of Spirit-filled worship, both for individuals and for the church collectively. The book of Acts clearly demonstrates that speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and Paul teaches that speaking in tongues is a spiritual gift (*charism*), that is intended to edify the whole church when it is accompanied by the gift of interpretation. But an often overlooked focus of praying in tongues is that it is a beautiful expression of worship.

How does the use of *glossolalia* edify the individual?

Explain why glossolalic expressions are valuable for both personal worship and for the gathered community.

Dr. David Lim identifies the worshipful nature of speaking in tongues when he writes, “Speaking in tongues is primarily directed to God, whether praise (Acts 2:11), mysteries (1 Corinthians 14:2), prayer (1 Corinthians 14:15), or thanksgiving (1 Corinthians 14:16–17)” (Lim 1991, 140). As with a prayer language, a person enjoys a deep connection with the Almighty when he or she employs this powerful form of prayer which, as Lim points out, is almost always God-directed. The apostle Paul elucidates the intimate and spiritually powerful nature of Spirit-prayer in his letter to the Romans when he says,

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will. (Romans 8:26–27)

Believers who pray in the Spirit can be confident that such prayer is indeed in harmony with God’s will, is glorifying to God, and is edifying to the human spirit.

The gift of speaking in tongues is also a powerful means of worship for the gathered community of believers. The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, taught that speaking in tongues in the church needed to be accompanied by an interpretation so that everyone in attendance could be edified (1 Corinthians 14:5). While some might interpret Paul's teaching to mean that he wants the gift of tongues to be limited in deference to prophecy, David Lim understands Paul's teaching to mean that the gift of tongues has a distinctly different purpose than prophecy. "Prophecy may not result in an immediate worship response because its primary direction is horizontal: to Christians and to the world" (Lim 1991, 141). However, the gift of tongues combined with interpretation stir the spirits of the congregation members and move them to worship. Lim writes, "The immediate result is worship from the congregation" (Lim 1991, 140). Why is this so? It is because, in Scripture, speaking in tongues is directed toward God and never toward people like a prophecy would be (Fee 1996, 148). Therefore, when a message in tongues is given in a church service, and an interpretation that glorifies God is supplied, the church joins in an exuberant chorus of worship.

So worshipping in tongues is an invaluable experience both for the individual worshipping privately and for the body of believers worshipping corporately. Spirit-filled believers can be lifted into the presence of God by this powerful and edifying means of worship.

11.6	Lesson 11.6 Worship and the Arts
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Worship Art

Because I am a musician, I readily identify with other musicians who call themselves *artists*. I have been trained to treat my craft as an art form, combining technique with passion to fashion musical experiences that stir the senses both aurally and emotionally. Music that is offered to the Lord in worship is a powerful medium for transporting a soul into the sublime, but it is certainly not the only art form that can function this way. Both biblically and historically, worshippers have used a wide variety of art forms to help humans connect with the Spirit of God.

Describe the biblical and historical importance of art in worship.

Art had its genesis in the divine canvas: Creation. Poet Steve Turner writes this:

The doctrine of creation teaches us that God made human beings in his image for the purpose of serving him in love and looking after the things he made. Creativity is part of that inherited image because God is designer and maker. Our desire to create, our ability to make concepts tangible and our pleasure in making are all reflections of God's original "let there be" and "it was good." (Turner 2001, 66)

With God's impulse to create imprinted in His nature, it was not long before humankind began to craft its own creations, and the art that was conceived was offered to God as worship.

When God instructed Moses to construct the ark and the tabernacle that would house it, He gave him explicit instructions on its construction, including the details of how it was to be decorated. Undoubtedly, when skilled craftsmen then manufactured them, they were not only worship spaces and tools, they were also artistic creations. In the same way, years later, when Solomon built the temple, it was also a glorious work of art. Worshippers in biblical times were evidently not content with mere functionality in their worship spaces. They were also artistic creations offered to God as acts of praise.

In terms of art, consider the Bible itself. It is a profound work of art that has been admired for its linguistic beauty for several millennia. The Psalter, along with the other biblical books of poetry, stands as a crowning achievement in poetry. The writings of the apostle Paul, while studied primarily for their doctrinal content, are also widely admired for their brilliant use of the Greek language. Even the scribes who took up the task of copying the Scriptures before the printing press eventually began to add their own artwork to the poetry and prose by lavishly decorating the pages of the text. These illuminated copies of the Bible are prized today by

collectors all over the world for the beauty of both the written word and the visual arts.

When the church began to expand after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, art again became an integral part of the worshipping community. Combining the communication tool of symbolism with artistic aesthetics, early Christians often used art not only to worship but to communicate biblical truth. As churches and cathedrals were constructed, great attention was given to the symbolism and decoration of the worship space. Architecture, painting, and sculpture combined, along with the musical and dramatic arts, to lead people in the worship of God and to articulate the essential doctrines of the faith.

Skillful Art

There is a pervasive assumption in today's world that some people are simply born with artistic skill. While God certainly gifts individuals in specific ways, artistic talent is both a gift and a skill that an artist must develop. In my case, I studied classical piano formally for fourteen years, and my skill as a musician is a reflection not only of God-given talent, but also of years of hard work. The popular television program, *American Idol*, illustrates the pervasiveness of the belief that some people are simply born with musical skill. On this phenomenally popular program, scores of ambitious Americans humiliate themselves every year on national television, believing they are great singers, when, in fact, they have succumbed to a sad misconception.

Analyze the biblical priority on skillful art in the worship of God.

When God instructed His people to begin constructing the structures to be used for worship, He specifically instructed them to select artisans who were highly skilled. In Exodus 26, God commanded that the curtains of the tabernacle be made by “skilled craftsmen.” In Exodus 28, He again called for “skilled men” to create the priestly garments for Aaron. Again and again in the process of constructing the tabernacle, God calls for skill in artistic design, and Moses echoes this priority in following God's instructions.

When David commissioned his son Solomon to construct the temple, his priority reflected those who went before him. He too appointed people with artistic skill to create the handsome structure. First Chronicles 22 mentions people who are skilled in working with gold, silver, bronze, and iron, as well as stonecutters, masons and carpenters. Second Chronicles 2 specifically identifies Hiram-Abi as “a man of great skill ... trained to work in gold and silver, bronze and iron, stone and wood, and with purple and blue and crimson yarn and fine linen. He is experienced in all kinds of engraving and can execute any design given to him” (2 Chronicles 2:13–14). Hiram-Abi and those who collaborated with him were people who had honed their skills in their crafts and used them to glorify God.

After the temple was constructed, skilled musicians were chosen to perform the worship music which, in addition to being a musical art, also included prophetic ministry. First Chronicles 25:7 says that all 288 musicians chosen for the musical worship in the temple were “trained and skilled in music for the Lord.” It is striking how often the Bible affirms that those who provided the visual and musical means of worshipping the Lord were people who had acquired artistic skill.

I do not mean to imply that worshipping God through the arts is all a result of human effort. On the contrary, God said of Bezalel, one of the fine craftsmen who crafted the tabernacle appointments, that he had “filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts” (Exodus 31:3). Without a doubt, those who worship the Lord through the arts must be full of the Spirit and should be functioning within the spiritual gifts that God has given. However, it is not enough to lean only on talent and inspiration—no matter how Spirit-filled it might be. Those of us who wish to use our arts to lead others in worship should also pursue excellence, honing our skills through training, apprenticing, studying, and whatever other means are available to us to perfect our craft. I believe that when we pursue excellence and elevate the skill level of the arts in our churches, then God will be glorified, and people will be inspired to worship the Most High God.

Today's Worship

I am thankful that many churches are experiencing a renaissance in the use of the arts in their worship services. I believe that returning to artistic

expressions of worship is not only a nod to the emerging culture, but it is also a return to our biblical and historical roots. Believers throughout the ages have used their God-breathed creativity to bring glory to God, and it is important for us to do so today as well.

What are some things a church can do to expand the use of the arts in worship?

Apply the biblical and historical significance of art in worship to the contemporary church.

Many beautiful artistic expressions are being used in churches today. Many churches—not just mainline denominations—are constructing worship centers that are not only functional but are also rich in symbolism and constructed by skilled artisans. Many churches celebrate the arts by displaying paintings and sculptures in spaces similar to a gallery, or by inviting artists to create during the musical worship or even during the preaching of the Word. Poetry is once again being employed as a means of worship, and spiritual dance is becoming much more common as an accompaniment to worship, or as a means of presenting a message in and of itself. Many churches are employing dramatic arts as an aid to worship, utilizing not only the art of acting, but of lighting and sound design to also enhance the congregation’s worship experience. Our church annually celebrates a fine arts festival, open to anyone in our church who has artistic skill. Every year we have dozens of artists—from beginners to those who make their living in the arts—display their visual arts or participate in a day of performing arts. It is a wonderful weekend of worshipping together through the arts. Another benefit of this festival is that we always discover someone who has an outstanding skill that we can employ in ministry throughout the year.

How do you begin expanding the use of the arts in your church? Start by stretching your concept of what arts are useful for worship. Many of us tend to think only of musical arts in worship. But all the arts have the potential

to provide powerful expressions of worship for the congregation. Think creatively to grow your church in the area of the arts.

Next, identify artists that worship in your congregation, and invite them to be a part of the worship experience. Our church has a number of professional artists who make their living with the canvas. When we built a new sanctuary and large foyer several years ago, a prominent architect in our city and a member of our church designed and built our new facility, a true work of art and an expression of worship. We invited one of the artists in our church to create two grand masterpieces to hang in prominent places in the foyer, and they are beautiful meditations on Scriptures that invite us to worship. More recently, another artist in our church provided slides of many of his works that we use as PowerPoint backgrounds for our song texts during worship.

Finally, if you really want to grow in the area of the worship arts, make art a priority in terms of personnel and budget. Many churches have moved beyond the traditional *music minister* and now employ a *pastor of fine arts*. Allocate reasonable funds for this ministry, understanding that skill in the arts requires training, and the raw materials for producing fine art are often costly. When art becomes a priority for churches, the worship experience is exponentially enhanced.

Whatever the art form employed, remember that worship is ultimately for God alone. It is not about us. We are the church—the *ekklesia*—gathered together in community—*koinonia*—with the purpose of exalting and glorifying God. He gives us gifts, we hone them and offer them back to Him, and together we glorify the God who has called us.

Chapter 12: A Life of Worship: Worship in the Everyday

Recently, my wife and I participated in a missions trip to Guaymas, Sonora, Mexico, with nineteen people, where we ministered to and with the Mexican people for nine days. Some of our memories will last a lifetime. Our Mexican hosts made a striking impression on all of us with their worship. The small church we ministered in did not have the technology that many worship teams use in larger churches. They did not have computers,

projectors, fancy effects units, or big amplification systems. In fact, they had few skilled worship musicians. Most of the time the congregation simply worshipped along with a CD of Spanish worship music, playing tambourines, and singing from the depths of their souls.

Their love of singing to the Lord made a big impression on our team. However, one worshipper in particular made a monumental impact on me. He was not the loudest singer; he did not jump the highest when the Spirit moved. He was not the one in front leading the praise, and he did not even play the guitar. He was the church caretaker, Miguel. Before our team arrived, as an act of worship, he spent an entire day working on plumbing in the church to be sure that we had bathroom facilities. He built a shower and roto-rooted the sewer that had backed up. Each day we were there, he joined us in mixing and pouring concrete, painting cement walls, and praying with the sick. He served us as we served the Lord, and he took time from his regular job and his family to make sure that no detail was forgotten. Why? Because he is a worshipper, and he has learned that every day and every activity can be offered to the Lord in worship.

Lesson 12.1 Laying Our Lives on the Altar

Objectives

12.1.1 Analyze the significance of offering one's body to God in worship (Romans 12:1).

12.1.2 Explain how Mark 12:30 presents a framework for worshipping God with our whole being.

12.1.3 Describe how spiritual transformation relates to worship (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Lesson 12.2 Competing for Worship

Objective

12.2.1 Specify the ways in which a Christian can repent of idolatry and become a more focused worshipper.

12. 1

Lesson 12.1 Laying Our Lives on the Altar

The Sacrifice of Worship

Romans 12:1–2 is one of the most significant passages of Scripture that defines worship:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Analyze the significance of offering one’s body to God in worship (Romans 12:1).

The most common word for worship in the New Testament is *proskuneo*, which means to express affection toward the object of worship by bowing. The literal meaning of the word is “to kiss toward.” The word Paul uses in Romans 12:1, however, is the Greek word *latreia*, used only five times in the New Testament. This word refers to performing sacred services, and in particular recalls the ministry of a Levitical priest. What is shocking about this verse is that Paul is envisioning the reader as being not only the worshipper, but the priest *and* the sacrifice itself. It is almost as if he envisions a worshipper entering the temple of God, donning the robes of the priest and climbing up on the altar to present his body to God. This “living sacrifice,” Paul says, is “holy and pleasing to God.”

What does this mean? Obviously, Paul is not suggesting that God requires worshippers to literally offer their bodies in an act of bloody ritual sacrifice. Instead, he is using a powerful metaphor. In verse 2, he clarifies what he means by giving two instructions, one negative and one positive. The

negative instruction is to stop conforming to the pattern of this world. Many of Paul's readers in Rome were people who had been converted from the pagan, and often very sensual, religions practiced in that city. No doubt many of them were tempted to continue participating in the many pleasures the city and their former religions had offered. But worshipping God, according to Paul, is not simply a matter of saying a prayer and singing some love songs to Jesus. Worshipping God means forsaking the lifestyle of sin that the previous life had held. True worship involves the whole of our beings—our bodies as well as our minds, emotions, and spirits.

The positive instruction Paul gives tells the reader exactly how to accomplish this lifestyle change. He says, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Worshipers who truly honor God with their whole beings will change the way they think. Jesus taught that a person's interior world always produces the exterior behavior. He said, “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him” (Matthew 12:34–35). If we find that our bodies are gravitating toward sin, it is evidence that our minds are fixed on sinful fantasies. If we want to worship God with our whole being, Paul says, we will only be transformed when we change the way we think.

This calls for mental discipline on the part of the worshipper. It is tempting to believe that our thought lives are ours alone—that private fantasies hurt no one. However, the adage “garbage in, garbage out” holds true. We cannot possibly honor God with our bodies while storing up garbage in our minds. We must discipline ourselves to filter the books we read, the television we watch, and the music we listen to—the list could go on and on—to be sure that our minds are leading us to worshipful behavior. The Word of God plays a large role in this transforming process as well. In Ephesians 5:26, Paul says that believers are washed with water through the Word. The process of transforming our minds is complete when we eliminate those things that lure us into temptation and replace them with the cleansing truth of God's Word.

**What does it mean to offer one's
body to God in worship?**

Holistic Worship

We will turn our attention once again to the American tendency to compartmentalize life. We worship on Sunday—such as it is—work on Monday, and spend the evenings with our kids. It may never occur to us that a questionable business deal or a cruel outburst to our spouse is actually a violation of the call to worship. We have kept worship safely stowed away in its own neat compartment.

***Explain how Mark 12:30 presents a framework for worshipping
God with our whole being.***

Rognlien writes that the word *heart* in the Bible refers primarily to the human will. Today, we usually think of the heart as the seat of our emotions, but in the biblical world, the heart was thought of as the place in which choices and decisions were made (Rognlien 2005, 37). Jesus said that you are to love God with *all* your heart—the sum total of every choice and decision and act of free will. Loving him intellectually or emotionally is not enough. True worship also includes the will.

Jesus also said that we are to love God with all our *soul*. Rognlien defines soul as that part of human nature that encompasses the emotions. Today's readers might identify the soul as being the seat of the interior spiritual being. However, Rognlien points out that is actually a Greek concept, not supported by Scripture (Rognlien 2005, 38). The emotions do play an important part in loving God. Cerebral worship or legalistic adherence to a code of ethics does not constitute true biblical worship; we must also engage our emotions.

A third part of loving God is doing so with all our mind. Rognlien writes, The biblical writers use the term *mind* to describe not just our ability to process information but also a consciousness that enables us to derive

meaning and wisdom from that information. This biblical view of the mind emphasizes “knowing,” which is both fact-based and relational. (Rognlien 2005, 38–39)

When you love God with all your mind, you are not just gathering information and processing facts *about* God, but you are also deriving meaning and developing a relationship *with* the One whom you are getting to know.

The final aspect of loving God in Jesus’ citation was loving Him with all our strength. In the Bible, this word can refer to personal determination, moral conviction, or to the physical aspect of a person (Rognlien 2005, 39). This is again referring to worshipping God with your body.

Loving God with all your strength means loving Him with your heart/will, soul/emotions, and mind/intellect. This approach to worship is not fragmented but is holistic as it engages all of who you are.

Describe how spiritual transformation relates to worship (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Transformational Worship

When I first returned from my nine-day missions trip to Mexico, I had that unique experience that others often report when they come home after several days of intense spirituality. We spent hours and hours praying, worshipping, and ministering through testimonies and preaching—days that also included exhausting, physical labor. For nine days our single focus was on presenting Jesus to people who did not know Him. Even during the times of physical activity (mixing concrete or riding on a bus), we were still very aware of the presence of God and the clear spiritual purpose we had for everything we did.

How does spiritual transformation relate to worship?

When our plane landed in our hometown, I was immediately bombarded with the reality of my normal life. My ministry colleagues were at the airport, reminding me of the impending duties of the coming week. When I finally walked into my home, I thought to myself, “I just want to be quiet and not forget what I have just experienced. I am not ready to walk away from the loftiness of the past week.” I wanted to protect myself from anything that would interfere with the glory I had experienced. I did not want the television on, I did not want to hear music, and I did not even want to engage in small talk with people who had no idea what I had just experienced. I just wanted to protect the glory.

Worship that involves the whole person—heart, soul, mind, and strength—produces this kind of glory. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, the apostle Paul said that “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” When we worship the Lord and experience His presence with every aspect of our being, we begin to see the Lord for who He really is. We—mere human beings—reflect the Lord’s glory and are transformed into a reflection of who He is in an ever-increasing way.

The Greek word translated “transformed” in this passage is *metamorphoo*, from which we get our English word metamorphosis. It means “to change into another form,” and it is the word used to describe Jesus being transfigured before the disciples in Mark 9. Like Jesus, whose clothes became “dazzling white,” we too are transfigured when the love of God becomes the center of everything we do, think, love, and choose. As we learn to abandon the compartmentalization that beguiles us and integrate our whole lives into the worship of God, the transformation increases. The glory radiates more and more, and we are morphed into the likeness of Christ.

This is the end result of presenting our bodies to God as a sacrifice of worship. When we lay everything we are on the altar, choosing transformation instead of compromise, the glory comes. We become radiant reflections of the love and life of Jesus, and, as Paul says, we will live in the center of God’s will—“his good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

12.2

Lesson 12.2 Competing for Worship

Exposing the Idols in Our Lives

Whenever I visit other countries, I am always curious to learn about other religious customs and worship practices. When my wife and I visited Singapore several years ago, we visited Buddhist temples, Hindu temples, and a Muslim mosque. In Mexico we visited a great cathedral in the city we were visiting and watched from a distance as worshippers prayed to Our Lady of Guadalupe. While I am curious about other religious traditions and I enjoy learning about their cultures, I am always saddened by the idolatry that is so prevalent in these places. It saddens me to see the Buddhist praying to a statue that cannot answer him; it is disheartening to see the Catholic worshipper redirect her prayer from Jesus to a *saint* who cannot save. These are idols that have replaced the one true God in many people's lives.

In Western cultures, the worship of these kinds of idols may not pose as great a temptation to many people, yet idol-like worship still competes for the affection of many Christians. If worship is attributing worth to something, then anything that eclipses the worthiness of God in our eyes becomes an idol.

What are some of the distractions that vie for the supremacy of God in our lives? In the previous chapter, I identified many of the worship distractions that can become idols in gathered worship. In our personal lives there are many more. For many people, the pursuit of success and financial gain becomes idolatrous in their lives. Other people become so consumed with sports—either as players or as spectators—that their affection and resources are entirely dedicated to the game. In my state, Montana, recreation is one of the idols that preoccupies many people's time, affection, and resources, and competes for their devotion to God. Hunting, fishing, hiking, boating, and skiing become the first love for many people and God becomes nothing more than an accessory to their lives.

One of the idols that tempts me most is music. It is a strange paradox that music is both the vehicle that transports me into God’s presence and also the idol that competes with God for my devotion. I love music of all kinds, and if I do not constantly remind myself that music is simply a ministry tool, I can become preoccupied with crafting beautiful melodies, harmonies, and rhythms without ever focusing on the Lord. Sometimes I even need other people to remind me that my music is for worshipping God. One of our worship team members who understands my struggle always puts his hand on my shoulder whenever we walk on to the stage and whispers in my ear, “Worship.” With that one word I am reminded that music is not my god, and that my focus must once again be directed to the Lord.

What idols compete for your affection? Expose them for what they are—false gods—and redirect your affection to the Lord.

Repenting of Idolatry

It is important that the idols in our lives be exposed, because Scripture gives many serious warnings to those who do not repent of idolatry. Philippians 3:19 warns about those who worship idols: “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.” Ephesians 5:5 says that idolaters, including immoral people, impure people, and greedy people, will have no inheritance in God’s kingdom. If we allow idolatry to persist in our lives, we are putting our eternal destiny in grave danger.

Specify the ways in which a Christian can repent of idolatry and become a more focused worshipper.

What do the apostles John and Paul have to say about how to deal with idolatry?

How does a person repent of idolatry and become more focused on worshipping the one true God? The New Testament offers very practical advice. The apostle John instructs, “Keep yourselves from idols” (1 John

5:21). This simply means that you do not go where idols are. In my case of idolizing music, this is not very easy. But here is one of the things I do to keep myself from this idol: I work very hard to keep myself from perfectionism in my music. It is the perfectionism and nit-picking of music that leads me away from worshipping God. Whatever idol you are drawn to, John advises you to keep away from it.

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:14, goes one step further. He admonishes us to “flee from idolatry.” It is not enough to simply avoid it; Paul says to run away from it! In Colossians 3:5–6, he even says that our idols must die: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.” As worshippers, it is vital that we understand the danger idolatry poses to us. We cannot afford to flirt with the things that lure us to displace the love of God in our lives because, Paul says, they will incur the wrath of God.

**What hope does Paul give to Christians
in 1 Corinthians 6:11?**

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, Paul lists idolatry with other wickedness that will have no inheritance in God’s kingdom. He includes sexual immorality, adultery, homosexuality, thievery, greed, drunkenness, slander, and swindling with idolatry. That’s quite a list! He reminds us that such wickedness “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” However, in verse 11, he offers Christians this wonderful affirmation: “And that is what some of you *were*. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (emphasis added). I am so thankful that, although I have at times succumbed to the temptation to divert my worship to other things, when I come to Christ, He washes me. Once He washes me, He sanctifies and justifies me (declares me “not guilty” before God). His cleansing is so complete that I can say with Paul, “That is what I *was*!” I am no longer guilty of idolatry, but by God’s grace I am now a worshipper of the one true God.

My wife and I have three dachshunds, all of whom are related. The youngest one’s name is Bonsai, and he is a quirky little dog with a

personality completely different from the other two. One of the funny things he does is hugging. When I sit down in a chair to read my Bible or the morning newspaper, Bonsai will joyfully jump in my lap and press his whole head into my neck as though he is hugging me. This is nothing I have taught him; it is just his manner of greeting me whenever I sit in my favorite chair. Some days after long sessions of counseling or several stressful meetings, I come home to one of Bonsai's hugs, and it gladdens my heart. The simple, unconditional love of a dog is one of the things that brings joy to my life.

I imagine that this is a tiny inkling of what God must feel whenever His children worship Him. With all of the sin, selfishness, violence, and idolatry that have overtaken His creation, God's heart must surely be gladdened whenever one of His children lifts up a song of praise expressing love for Him. How much more so must God rejoice when His children gather together to worship Him in concert? The Bible indicates that whenever we worship Him, God joins in the song:

The Lord your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)

Would you join me in answering the call to worship? Brian Doerksen sings these words:

Come, now is the time to worship
Come, now is the time to give your heart
Come, just as you are to worship
Come, just as you are before your God.
One day every tongue will confess you are God
One day every knee will bow
Still the greatest treasure remains for those
Who gladly choose you now.

Indeed, the Bible says that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10–11). On that day many will bow the knee unwillingly as they face the wrath of God. But the greatest treasure is reserved for those who answer the call to worship today. Now is the time to worship!

Glossary		
Brother Lawrence	— (1610–1691) a French monk who worked in the monastery kitchen most of his life. He performed every task out of his love for God. He wrote <i>The Practice of the Presence of God</i> . He died in obscurity and is remembered for the closeness of his relationship to God.	1
Catherine of Genoa	— (1447–1510) a nun and author who gave herself to the care of the sick in the hospital of Genoa, Italy.	3

church at Laodicea	—	one of the seven churches (all in Turkey) addressed in Revelation. Located on a commercial route, the city was very rich. Laodicea produced wool clothes and eye salve. Church members considered themselves rich, having need of nothing from Christ. They were spiritually blind; they needed to repent. This was the only church of the seven about which Christ had nothing positive to say, yet He was still knocking on the doors of their minds and hearts, hoping to be invited in.	1
Dagon	—	this idol worshipped by the Philistines was represented as half human and half fish. He was a god of nature and fertility.	1 1
externalize	—	to attribute to causes outside of the self.	8
Francis de Sales	—	(1567–1622) a highly educated priest and author who believed that whatever God had in store for him was good because God is love.	5
golden censor	—	The vessel in which the incense was presented on the golden altar before the Lord in the temple.	3

guerrillas of the Spirit	—	Patterson uses this unconventional term to refer to a Christian who is an aggressive intercessor.	3
Irenaeus	—	a priest, bishop, and author born in the second half of the second century. He lived in what is now France. Almost all of his writings were directed against Gnosticism.	9
Judah Country	—	a creative way of loosely referring to the area of the Jezreel Valley in Palestine where Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah lived.	8
Julian of Norwich	—	(1342–c.1416) a Medieval English nun who lived in seclusion for the sake of devoting her life to prayer. She was well-known in England and her theology differed from other religious leaders of the day; she emphasized joy and compassion, saying that God loved all people and His salvation was offered for all. She wrote <i>Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love</i> (about 1393).	1
lobotomy	—	a surgical severance of nerve fibers connecting the frontal lobes to the thalamus performed for the relief of some mental disorders.	4

Meister Eckhart	— (c.1260–c.1328) a German theologian and philosopher. He felt that the great need of a human is that his or her soul be united with God.	3
patriarchal period	— the years from Abraham's birth through Jacob's death. The time is roughly estimated to be 215 years, through the lifetimes of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, those years occurred somewhere between 1750 to 1500 B.C.	2
periphery	— outer edge, external boundary or surface of a body, perimeter of an area.	7
polytheistic	— describes a religion that believes in or worships more than one god.	2
Samaritan	— an ethnic group that descended from the Israelites. While they have connections to ancient Samaria, the group gets its name from their religion, Samaritanism. Their religion is based on the Torah and the keeping of the law. The Torah they profess differs from that of the Jews. Estimates claim that there are currently less than eight hundred Samaritans.	2

Scott Wesley Brown	—	a veteran Christian artist whose music career spans more than three decades. He teaches many worship and mission seminars in addition to maintaining a concert schedule. He lives with his family in San Diego.	3
secularization	—	the removal of the religious dimension or element from something, making it secular.	7
spiritual journal	—	Christians can benefit from regularly writing in a journal (not necessarily daily) as a discipline to focus attention on our relationship with God throughout our lives. This discipline will help to clarify the heart and mission of our individual lives. We should write the thoughts concerning our lives that we long to share with God and record what we feel God is saying to us. This would also include making note of the answers we receive to our prayers.	5
status quo	—	a Latin term meaning “the existing state of affairs.”	3

Sychar	—	An ancient city in Samaria, south of Nazareth, and located between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. At one time this land had been purchased by Jacob and it is said that Joseph is buried in a tomb not far from the well where Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink. The ancients called this water “living water” because it came from underground springs and was moving water, not from a cistern.	10
Teresa of Avila	—	(1515–1582) a Spanish nun who devoted herself to prayer and focused on Christ’s passion.	7
transcendence		being beyond the limits of ordinary experience, beyond comprehension.	1

Taylor, C. (2006). [*Prayer and Worship: An independent-study textbook*](#) (pp. 86–206). Springfield, MO: Global University.

