

The Essentials of Effective Prayer



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4minute
BIBLE STUDIES

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PRECEPT MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL



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P R E S S

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This small-group study is for people who are interested in learning for themselves more about what the Bible says on various subjects, but who have only limited time to meet together. It's ideal, for example, for a lunch group at work, an early morning men's group, a young mothers' group meeting in a home, a Sunday-school class, or even family devotions. (It's also ideal for small groups that typically have longer meeting times—such as evening groups or Saturday morning groups—but want to devote only a portion of their time together to actual study, while reserving the rest for prayer, fellowship, or other activities.)

This book is designed so that all the group's participants will complete each lesson's study activities *at the same time*. Discussing your insights drawn from what God says about the subject reveals exciting, life-impacting truths.

Although it's a group study, you'll need a facilitator to lead the study and keep the discussion moving. (This person's function is *not* that of a lecturer or teacher. However, when this book is used in a Sunday-school class or similar setting, the teacher should feel free to lead more directly and to bring in other insights in addition to those provided in each week's lesson.)

If *you* are your group's facilitator, the leader, here are some helpful points for making your job easier:

- Go through the lesson and mark the text before you lead the group. This will give you increased familiarity with the material and will enable you to facilitate the group with greater ease. It may be easier for you to lead the group through the instructions for marking if you, as a leader, choose a specific color for each symbol you mark.

- As you lead the group, start at the beginning of the text and simply read it aloud in the order it appears in the lesson, including the “insight boxes,” which appear throughout. Work through the lesson together, observing and discussing what you learn. As you read the Scripture verses, have the group say aloud the word they are marking in the text.
- The discussion questions are there simply to help you cover the material. As the class moves into the discussion, many times you will find that they will cover the questions on their own. Remember, the discussion questions are there to guide the group through the topic, not to squelch discussion.
- Remember how important it is for people to verbalize their answers and discoveries. This greatly strengthens their personal understanding of each week’s lesson. Try to ensure that everyone has plenty of opportunity to contribute to each week’s discussions.
- Keep the discussion moving. This may mean spending more time on some parts of the study than on others. If necessary, you should feel free to spread out a lesson over more than one session. However, remember that you don’t want to slow the pace too much. It’s much better to leave everyone “wanting more” than to have people dropping out because of declining interest.
- If the validity or accuracy of some of the answers seems questionable, you can gently and cheerfully remind the group to stay focused on the truth of the Scriptures. Your object is to learn what the Bible says, not to engage in human philosophy. Simply stick with the Scriptures and give God the opportunity to speak. His Word *is* truth (John 17:17)!

THE ESSENTIALS OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

Do you pray?
Really, do you pray? How often? How effective
do your prayers seem to be?

Do you question whether your prayer life is all it should be? Do you ever wonder if God still answers when people pray? Do you worry that you don't truly understand what prayer really is?

If you've asked yourself these questions, you are not alone. Almost all of us have questioned at some time what prayer really is and how—or if—it really works.

In this study we will discover the answers to these questions as we examine what Scripture teaches about prayer and consider how to apply those truths to our own lives.

We also will explore the connection between prayer and pleasing God. A. W. Tozer, a man known for the vitality of his prayer life, once wrote, “What the praying man does is to bring his will into line with the will of God so God can do what He has all along been willing to do.”¹

For the next six weeks we will learn how to bring our will in line with the will of God. We hope that by the end of this study your prayer life will be more exciting and vibrant than ever before.

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Price of Neglect*, comp. Harry Verploegh (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1991), 51–52.

WEEK ONE

We know prayer has to do with communicating with God, but what exactly does that look like? What's the point of praying? Does a sovereign God really care about our concerns? And if He does, how should we approach Him? What sort of things do we ask for or talk to Him about?

This week we'll try to understand the nature and purpose of prayer by examining some people of prayer and references to prayer in the Bible.

OBSERVE

James, the brother of Jesus, in his New Testament letter mentioned one of the great men of prayer from the Old Testament: Elijah.

Leader: Read James 5:16b–18.

- Have the group say aloud and mark the words **prayer** and **prayed** with a **P**.

As you read the text, it's helpful to have the group say the key words aloud as they mark them. This way everyone will be sure they are marking every occurrence of the word, including any synonymous words or phrases. Do this throughout the study.

JAMES 5:16B–18

16 The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.

18 Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking the references to *prayer* in this passage?
- Have you ever had an experience like Elijah's? Do you feel that your prayers "accomplish much"? Explain your answer.
- Elijah was a man like us, but his prayer life was unlike most of ours. It is a little intimidating, isn't it? Over the next six weeks we will see what it takes to transform our prayer life into one like Elijah's.

1 KINGS 8:27–30, 38–39

²⁷ "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!

OBSERVE

Let's look at a prayer offered by King Solomon, the third king of ancient Israel, at the dedication of the first temple of God in Jerusalem.

Leader: *Read 1 Kings 8:27–30, 38–39. Have the group say aloud and...*

- put an **S** over each reference to **Solomon**. Since he is speaking in this passage, watch carefully for pronouns and synonyms that refer to him, including the phrase **Your servant**.
- mark every reference to **prayer** with a **P**, including synonyms such as **supplication, cry, and spreading his hands**.

INSIGHT

Supplication in this passage refers to a request for favor or grace.

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking the references to *Solomon*?
- What did you learn from marking the references to *prayer* in this passage?

28 “Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You today;

29 that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which You have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place.

30 “Listen to the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; hear in heaven Your dwelling place; hear and forgive.

38 whatever prayer or supplication is made by any man or by all Your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart, and spreading his hands toward this house;

39 then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive and act and render to each according to all his ways, whose heart You know, for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men.”

- How did Solomon characterize God’s relationship with His people?
- What was he asking of God?
- Discuss the synonyms for prayer that you marked in this passage. What do they reveal about the nature of prayer?

OBSERVE

The book of Psalms is a collection of songs and prayers for the people of God. We will look at three psalms of David. The first was written when he fled from Absalom, his son who led a conspiracy to take not only David’s throne but also his life (2 Samuel 15).

Leader: Read Psalm 3:1–5 aloud. Have the group...

- put a **D** over each occurrence of the pronouns **my, me, him, and I** when they refer to **David**, who is speaking in this passage.
- put a **P** over the phrase **crying to the Lord**.

INSIGHT

The word *selah* appears frequently in the psalms. Its meaning is unclear, but many scholars believe *selah* is a musical term indicating a pause in the music.

DISCUSS

- What did you learn about David in verses 1 and 2? How would you describe his emotions at this point?
- The word *but* in verse 3 signals a contrast, a change in direction. According to verses 4 and 5, what actions did David take in the

PSALM 3:1–5

1 O LORD, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me.

2 Many are saying of my soul, “There is no deliverance for him in God.” Selah.

3 But You, O LORD, are a shield about me, My glory, and the One who lifts my head.

4 I was crying to the LORD with my voice, And He answered me from His holy mountain. Selah.

5 I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the LORD sustains me.

midst of his enemies and their taunting, and why did he pursue this course of action?


- What phrase is used in this passage to describe prayer?
- When God answered David's prayer, how did David respond? What shift does this indicate from the emotions he felt at the start of the prayer?
- Think of a time you felt worried or oppressed, when it seemed all the odds were against you. What did you do?

Leader: *Invite someone in the group to share such a situation from their personal experience and describe how they responded.*

- Discuss what you've learned about prayer from this passage and how you can apply it to your life.

OBSERVE

Leader: Read aloud Psalm 4:1–5. Have the group...

- put a **P** over every reference to **prayer**, including the phrases **when I call** and **meditate in your heart**.
- mark every reference to **God**, including pronouns and synonyms, with a triangle: 

DISCUSS

- Once again David was clearly in a stressful situation. How did he respond?
- What did he expect God to do in regard to his prayer? On what did David base his expectation?
- What did you learn about God from this passage?
- What did you observe about our emotions in connection with prayer, according

PSALM 4:1–5

¹ Answer me [David] when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have relieved me in my distress; be gracious to me and hear my prayer.

² O sons of men, how long will my honor become a reproach? How long will you love what is worthless and aim at deception? Selah.

³ But know that the LORD has set apart the godly man for Himself; the LORD hears when I call to Him.

⁴ Tremble, and do not sin; meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah.

⁵ Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and trust in the LORD.

PSALM 5:1–3

¹ Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my groaning.

² Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, for to You I pray.

³ In the morning, O LORD, You will hear my voice; in the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.

to verses 4 and 5? What choice do we have other than denying our emotions or giving in to them? Explain your answer.

- How can you apply what you have just learned about prayer the next time you encounter a stressful situation?

OBSERVE

We've seen that when David encountered stressful situations, rather than giving in to his fears or focusing on his circumstances, he called out to God and trusted in Him. The result was peace in the midst of the difficulty as David offered up a sacrifice of righteousness. Now let's look at one more example from this man of prayer.

Leader: *Read Psalm 5:1–3 aloud. Have the group...*

- put a **D** over each occurrence of the pronouns **my** and **I**, which refer to **David**, who is speaking in this passage.
- put a **P** over every reference to **prayer**, including synonyms such as **my words**, **my groaning**, and **my cry**.

DISCUSS

- Discuss what you learned about David and his character from this passage. What were his first thoughts each day?
- What did you learn from marking the references to *prayer*? What was David praying for, and what did he expect to happen?

Leader: If time permits, invite someone to share with the group how they plan to apply the teachings of this passage to their own life.

OBSERVE

So far we've seen prayer described as crying out to God. Crying out in pain, in fear, in desperation. Most of us can identify with that kind of prayer. But prayer isn't limited to crying out for help in times of trouble; it can serve an even greater purpose, as we'll see in the next few passages.

First, let's look at some verses from Isaiah, in which God describes what's wrong with the prayers of the people of Jerusalem. Although this is a negative example, it serves

ISAIAH 29:13–14

¹³ Then the Lord said, “Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote,

¹⁴ therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men will perish, and the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed.”

to teach us another way to describe what prayer is really about.

Leader: *Read Isaiah 29:13–14 aloud. Have the group...*

- *circle every reference to **the people**, including pronouns.*
- *put a **P** over the phrases **draw near** and **honor me**.*

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking the references to *the people* in the passage?
- How did the people draw near to God? Were their hearts in it? Explain your answer.
- In this context what does *draw near* mean?
- How did God feel about the people drawing near?
- What was His response?

- Would God answer their prayers? Why or why not?
- Discuss how this passage might be relevant to our worship services and prayer life today.

OBSERVE

Leader: Read Hebrews 4:14–16; 7:25; and 10:19–22 aloud. Have the group say and...

- circle each occurrence of the pronouns **we**, **us**, and **our**, which refer to **believers**.
- mark each reference to **Jesus**, including pronouns such as **He** and **Him** and synonyms such as **high priest** and **One**, with a cross: †
- put a **P** over the phrase **draw near**.

DISCUSS

- What did you learn from marking the references to *believers* in these verses? What do we have, and what are we to do?

HEBREWS 4:14–16

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

¹⁶ Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

HEBREWS 7:25

²⁵ Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

HEBREWS 10:19-22

¹⁹ Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus,

²⁰ by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh,

- For what purpose(s) would we draw near to the throne of God?

- What gives us the confidence to approach Him?

- What did you learn about prayer from these verses?

- Discuss what we can expect when we pray and how this applies to your own prayer life.

²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

²² let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

WRAP IT UP

Have you listened to others pray and felt intimidated because their words sounded so well composed? Relax. Prayer doesn't require an appointment, it doesn't require proper attire, and it doesn't even require proper grammar. As David's example shows, prayer is as natural as crying out. Crying out and telling God what is on your heart. Crying out and telling God what you need. Crying out and making supplication.

What is prayer? Prayer is simply drawing near to God and talking with Him. As we read in Hebrews 4, we have access to Him through our high priest, Jesus Christ. Because of Him, we can enter the throne room of heaven and draw near to God. There we can cry out, we can ask for help, we can lay our troubles at His feet. Then, as David demonstrated in psalms 3 and 4, we can rest because we know the Lord sustains us.

This week set aside some time to cry out to God about the concerns of your heart. Draw near to Him and enjoy His presence.

***Leader:** If you have time, pause for the group to pray silently. Encourage them to cry out to God about the concerns of their hearts. Encourage them to draw near to Him and enjoy His presence. After a few minutes of silence, close in prayer, asking God to teach your group to pray.*