

**Discipline:**

Praying Scripture

**Text:**

Psalms 119:97-104

**Series Introduction:**

This series originated as a result of wanting to see each of us know God better and through the ongoing practice of specific disciplines, to be able to follow his leading more. The title comes from Psalm 42:1 which—using the popular song as our translation—says: “As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.” It is my hope that these lessons will help you do just that: long for God more.

Each week in this series will be focused on a specific discipline that have for centuries helped followers of Jesus know him better. Although there will be a Biblical text and some of the discussion questions will be focused on this text, this series will be very “active.” There will be both group and individual practices that each group and each person will be encouraged to do in order gain the most out of these lessons. Discussion time will not be so much “What does this Biblical author say about this?” as it will be “How has this practice helped you follow God better?”

I know we at times prefer discussion lessons—ask/answer seven questions and see you next week—but let me encourage you to really focus on the practices, even if this is not your preferred group style. While it may be out of the comfort zone of some, I promise the reward of stepping out of that zone is of great benefit for being a better disciple.

Although the lessons are going to be “assigned” to specific weeks, they do not have to be used in any specific chronological order, with two caveats. First, I would recommend the lesson on Bible Study be the first lesson used. Second, although I am working to get ahead on writing the lessons, you obviously will not have any more lessons to choose from than have been written.

As you have seen, the series is divided into two sections. The first section is for the group leader or person leading the discussion. The second is a Participant’s Guide that can be printed off for everyone or emailed to group members.

**Information about the Discipline:**

When I was a junior in college there were several of us involved in the leadership of small group Bible studies who committed to spend time each morning in prayer. A friend was doing it and had spoken of how this practice had begun to change his life, so we felt like it would be a good practice for us as well. He regularly prayed for an hour every morning, so our plan was to also pray for an hour. I remember the first morning this was to start. Knowing I was not enamored with arising early in the morning, the night before I had listed everything I knew to

pray about. That way I would have something to help guide the process. I set my alarm for an hour earlier than I normally got up, managed to actually get up, and then fervently prayed for everything on my list, perhaps more so than I had ever done before. When I finished, I looked at my clock. 6:05. Great, now what was I going to spend the rest of the hour doing!?

You may be a lot like this. You want to pray and you even have things to pray about, but you feel like you go through your list in rapid fashion with nothing else to guide your thoughts in prayer. (By the way, having “short” prayers is not a negative at all. The issue is that you want to spend much time in prayer but feel you have nothing to say, you are at a lose for words.) Praying the scriptures is a way to use the words that are already God's words to help guide your conversation with him.

Here's how it works: Select a passage that is either a known prayer in scripture (Psalm 23, The Lord's Prayer, Mary's song to God after being told of her selection to give birth to Christ, often referred to as the *Magnificat*, which is the first word of the prayer in Latin—Luke 1.46-55). There are plenty of other prayers or songs you can use. You can also use the Psalms. Although each psalm is not specifically written as a “prayer,” they are all the words of God's people speaking about him, in reaction to him, or so that others know about him. As such, they shape our understanding of God as we speak those verses as prayers.

During your prayer or study time, read through your selected passage. Read it slowly, thinking about each word or phrase. Substitute your name in the places of pronouns to help make it more personal, if desired.

Ask yourself these questions: What is the original speaker of this prayer asking or saying? In what ways do I ... or do I need to ... ask the same questions? How does this prayer tell me truth about God that I either know or need to know?

Psalm 119, which is the text I have selected for this week, allows a couple of things to happen as we pray the scripture. First, Psalm 119 is a psalm that focuses on the law of God, that is, on scripture. Even in reading these verses, we are drawn back into the scripture. Second, I believe it is a prayer that we all need to pray more: that we will delight in the law of the Lord. Given what we looked at in the Bible Study lesson last week, you can see the importance of a psalm like this to shape our prayers.

The Psalter, by the way, has historically been not only the “song book” of the church; it has been the prayer book as well. (This is the reason I selected to begin my year reading through the Psalms.) Throughout history, most of the people you would describe as “devoted to God” used the Psalms as a significant part of their regular reading and prayer time. Praying the Psalms will always be a great place to focus your efforts as you try to pray scripture.

## **Discussion Questions:**

*Icebreaker Question:* Describe a time when you read a quote, book, or perhaps scripture and thought: That's it! That is exactly what I wanted to say but didn't have the words to say it. Why do we have moments when we know what we think—sort of—but just can't get it out in verbal form? In what ways has prayer been like this for you: you wanted to say things, but just did not have the words?

- How do you decide what to put on your daily prayer list? What happens if you run out of things to put on your list?

- Psalm 119 is a psalm that encourages us to look to God's word as a source for guidance, in fact, it says we should "meditate on it all day long." Given what we talked about last week when we discussed Bible study, how well have you done that this past week?
- In what ways can the words of God become prayers for you that you can recite throughout the entire day.
- What verses of scripture describe what you are feeling about God or following him in words you would have never come up with? Share these verses with your group.
- How does using the words of God to pray the scriptures help you gain better insight to God and who he is? How do they help you know better how to follow him?
- If you were to list all of the things you have prayed for in the past several weeks, what types of things do you think you would find on your list? As you mentally review it, what do you think you should add to your list of things for which you pray?
- How would praying a regular schedule of scripture (perhaps through the Psalms, for instance) help you avoid routine or rote prayers? How would they change your focus from you to a focus on God?

### **Group Practices:**

As a group, I want you to spend some time praying the scripture together. I think Psalm 119 would be a good passage, but you may choose another section of scripture as well or you might even repeat the same passage amongst all members. (There is power in having multiple people read the same passage. Each person emphasizes different aspects and so you often hear a passage differently based on who is reading the passage.)

Start at the beginning of the passage and go around the circle having each person read a portion of the text. If you have time when you conclude the prayer, visit for a moment or two about people's reactions to this prayer time. What was positive to them? What might have been negative?

Let your group know that this is your prayer time as a group. If you have specific requests, share them for the group to pray for later, but be sure to spend time in praying the scripture.

Encourage your group members to spend some time praying the scripture this week as described in the Participant Guide.

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**Individual Practices:**

The individual practice for this week is to spend time praying the scripture.

All of us have unique lives of prayer. Some of us have a great prayer life and you find that you are too busy not to pray, as someone has said. Others of us pray regularly, but we at times find our prayers to be very routine and we feel they lack depth or vitality. For some of us, when we take an honest look at our list of prayer requests, we discover that prayer is really all about us, not about God. We want our life of prayer to be something more than a checklist of ways God can give us our requests. For others, we just do not have the words to pray. They are either buried too deep under the pain and confusion or we struggle to know what to even say when we address the God of the universe.

One of the practices used throughout the ages to help focus followers of God in their prayer life is to take a section of scripture and pray through that section as if they are our words we are praying to God. Because the words we find in scripture are the words of God, we know that they will help us focus on who God is. We also know that they were originally spoken by someone who followed God, so we can find a common ground in the feelings, emotions, and thoughts of the original writers. By using God's words, we discover those things important to God, so we are more focused on him through this practice. Also, we will discover as we go through various Biblical texts that the writers of scripture did not hold back on expressing some of their emotions to God. If you read through the Psalms, you find discouragement, frustration, even anger were a part of the writer's emotions. Certainly those emotions describe some of our own feelings.

Here's how to go about doing this.

First, find a passage or passages to use as your text to pray.

You might choose the Psalms and just read through them sequentially. You might choose seven different texts, using a different one each day. You might also select one text and pray it everyday. While that seems like a redundancy, what you will discover is that as you go through the text each day, you will "hear" different things.

Next, just like you did with your Bible study, find a moment in your day when you can read through this text as a prayer to God. While I do not believe that you have to have your hands folded in your lap and your eyes closed, it is beneficial to take a moment to stop and sit in a place where it is quiet. If you read something quickly as you run out the door, you will not have spent the time you need to hear what God is saying to you through this text.

As you read through your passage, if appropriate, put your name in the place of pronouns. (The Lord is Rob's shepherd...) Although it may seem strange to hear you being described in the third person, it helps you to focus on the personal aspects of what is being said in the passage.

Ask yourself some of the following questions:

- In what ways does this passage communicate something you are thinking or feeling (but perhaps have not been able to articulate)?
- What is being communicated to God in this passage?
- What is God communicating to the main characters in this passage?
- What do we discover about God in this passage?
- In what ways should I make this discovery a prayer or request to God (God, may I know your compassion more)?
- How does this passage call on me to live a different life than the one I already am living?

Pray your passage slowly. The point is not to finish, but to allow the passage to speak words to you and to God. Think about what each phrase means. (See the example of Simone Weil listed below.)

Finally, take your passage and either memorize (or summarize) the passage or select a phrase from the passage to be a repeated prayer throughout the day. Allow this passage to be continually on your lips as you "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18).

## **Other Resources:**

Here are some passages I would recommend to use as texts to pray this week:

The Psalms

Psalm 119

Psalm 23

Psalm 51

Psalm 139

The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6.9-13; Luke 11.2-4)

Mary's Song (Luke 1.46-55)

The Songs of Praise around the Throne (Revelation 4.8, 11; 5.9-10, 12, 13)

Works on Prayer

*Prayer—Tenth Anniversary Edition: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster

(When it comes to spiritual disciplines, Richard Foster has long been known as one of the best authors on the subject. He covers the twelve classical disciplines in *Celebration of Discipline* and while he does not have a work on every one of the individual disciplines, he does on prayer and it would be the place I would start if I were reading about prayer. He covers a broader spectrum than just praying scripture, but it is still the best place to start.)

## Classic Works

*Concerning the Our Father* by Simone Weil, found at <http://thevalueofsparrows.com/2012/03/16/prayer-concerning-the-our-father-by-simone-weil/> on January 5, 2015.

(While certainly not the only classical author to write on prayer, Weil does an excellent job of taking a prayer passage and reflecting on the passage. This can serve a good example for the way we think through the passages we read, providing us with more than just a cursory overview of the words. Her example should help us focus on the richness of these passages.)