

INTRODUCTION

PREPARING TO COMMUNICATE WITH GOD

Prayer is communication. It is not a set of words or a memorized formula, nor is it an empty repetition of words and phrases. It is one person speaking with another—more specifically, one person speaking with God—and listening to what God has to say in return. This is true communication: two people speaking together, listening together, sharing themselves together.

Many good communication books are on the market today. The Bible, however, is God's foremost book about His communication with us. It is the source from which we receive new insights and eternal wisdom. It is the reference book to which we must continually return to make certain that what we hear from other people is acceptable to God and is true wisdom. You should read and study the Bible on a daily basis. It may be far more valuable for you to write what you learn from this study guide into the margins and end pages of your Bible than for you to write passages of the Bible or insights you have into this guide.

This book can be used by you alone or by several people in a small-group study. At various times, you will be asked to relate to the material in one of the following four ways.

First, what new insights have you gained? Make notes about the insights you have. You may want to record them in your Bible or in a separate journal. As you reflect on your new understanding, you are likely to see how God has moved in your life.

Second, have you ever had a similar experience? You approach the Bible from your own unique background . . . your own particular set of understandings about the world that you bring with you when you open God's Word. For this reason, it is important to consider how your experiences are shaping your understanding and allow yourself to be open to the truth that God reveals.

Third, how do you feel about the material? While you should not depend solely on your emotions as a gauge for your faith, it is important for you to be aware of them as you study a passage of Scripture and can freely express them to God. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit will use your emotions to compel you to look at your life in a different or challenging way.

Fourth, in what way do you feel challenged to respond or to act? God's Word may inspire you or challenge you to take a particular action. Take this challenge seriously and find ways to move into it. If God reveals a particular need that He wants you to address, take that as His "marching orders." God will empower you to do something with the challenge that He has just given you.

Start your Bible study sessions in prayer. Ask God to give you spiritual eyes to see and spiritual ears to hear. As you conclude your study, ask the Lord to seal what you have learned so you will not forget it. Ask Him to help you grow into the fullness of the nature and character of Christ Jesus.

I encourage you to keep the Bible at the center of your study. A genuine Bible study stays focused on God's Word and promotes a growing faith and a closer walk with the Holy Spirit in each person who participates.

LESSON 1

OUR NEED TO COMMUNICATE WITH GOD

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: What is prayer?

Growing: How should I pray?

Prayer, in its broadest definition, is communication with God. This includes both *verbal* and nonverbal *communication*. It covers your thoughts and actions toward God as well as the words you speak to your Creator. Prayer is a natural desire within you, for your Maker built this need to communication with Him into your being. It is part of His imprint on your life.

Based on this definition of prayer, some people may conclude that we are continually in communication with the Lord, because virtually everything we do is a message that we send to God or make before God. After all, God sees everything we do and knows everything we think and feel. From that vantage, our entire lives are prayers of a sort.

Others conclude we live continually in an atmosphere of prayer because God is always communicating with us. He sends messages about His great love for us. We have the Bible as His Word. He have messages that come through the loving actions and words of others. We have messages we perceive in the deep stirring of our spirits.

However, these two views of prayer are in error on one key point: *communication* is a two-way process. Simply sending a message is not communication. Communication requires that two parties respond to each other. Each party gives and receives messages and, in turn, provides feedback. A statement is made . . . and a specific response is provided. A question is asked . . . and an answer is given. Feelings are vented . . . and feelings are perceived in return.

True communication with God is not just talking to God but talking with God. You do not communicate if you merely voice a petition to God but do not wait for His answer. You do

PRAYER IS INTENTIONAL

At the outset of this study, there are few key points regarding prayer that we need to clarify.

First, prayer does not happen by accident. You may express your prayers through feelings and thoughts, but prayer must be intentional for it truly to be a form of communication. You must actively engage in the process. You must turn your mind, heart, and voice toward God.

Voicing a concern to a friend is not prayer. Silently wishing that something might be so is not prayer. Confessing a fault to another person is not prayer. Feeling a spring in your step as you rejoice in the warmth and beauty of a summer day is not prayer. To be engaged in prayer, you must voice your thoughts to God with an expectation He will hear you and will respond.

To be engaged in prayer, you must yield your desires to God and expect Him to answer or change your desires as part of the process. To be in genuine prayer, you must make your confessions to God and actively receive His cleansing and forgiveness. To be a people of prayer, you must give voice to your thanksgiving and praise and open yourself fully to the presence of God at work in you and around you.

3. “Daniel . . . went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days” (Daniel 6:10). What would you describe as your “custom” when it comes to your prayer habits?

4. What are some ways that you make prayer intentional in your life? What difficulties have you faced in doing this? What benefits have you received? [Your Response Here]

PRAYER IS A DIALOGUE

Second, prayer is a dialogue between you and God. As you engage in prayer, you may voice to God your heartfelt cries of anguish, sorrow, pain, or give vent to your ecstatic joy. Likewise, God may give you a direction or speak a command to you. (Indeed, the Lord speaks when He wills to speak—and it is your responsibility to listen and obey.) At these times, you are talking to God or He is talking to you. This is expression, and it is valuable. However, it is not the most beneficial form of communication in a relationship.

Communication that builds relationships is dialogue. Genuine prayer has all the qualities and characteristics of a deeply meaningful conversation between two people. As God said to Isaiah, “Come now, and let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). This image of God and humans sitting down together for a good talk is our best image of prayer.

Can you imagine living in a relationship with a person who made demands but never waited to hear what you had to say? Such a relationship would be unfulfilling. You might establish a degree of civility and even work efficiently with that person, but the relationship would always be cold. This is precisely the nature of many people’s prayer life. There is no heart to their communication with God, no real intimacy, and no deep fulfillment. For communication to be satisfying, it must involve a genuine dialogue . . . not a series of short monologues.

The end result of intentional dialogue can be wonderful. We know this to be true in our relationships with other people. When we have deep and heartfelt conversations with others, we often come away saying, “I have a much better understanding of them and their problems,” “I have deeper feelings toward them,” “I have a greater appreciation of them,” or, “We have a stronger friendship.” The same is true when you communicate intentionally and in dialogue with God. You know Him more fully, understand Him better, feel more at home in His presence, find cause to praise Him more, and have a deeper relationship with Him.

5. “Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him” (Psalm 37:7). What are some ways that you rest in the Lord? How do you wait patiently for Him in prayer?

6. What are some of the things that God has revealed to you as you have engaged in a two-way dialogue with Him in prayer?

PRAYER IS A DAILY PRIORITY

Third, prayer is something we must make a daily priority in our lives. Prayer is something we do on a continual basis. We are not to pray just when we run into crises or need immediate help. Rather, we are to pray daily—in both the good times and the bad.

In the Bible, we find Jesus often going off by Himself to spend time in prayer. In one story, we read that He spent an entire day in the city of Capernaum “[healing] many who were sick with various diseases, and [casting] out many demons” (Mark 1:34). But then, in the next verse, we read, “Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed” (verse 35).

I believe this was the habit of Jesus’ life—to just get alone with God and just talk with Him about the events of the day. This was a habit that He made a priority . . . regardless of what situation He was facing. For instance, in another story, we read how Jesus—after learning of the death of John the Baptist—went away to a deserted place to spend time in prayer. But this time, the multitudes learned of His actions and “followed Him on foot from the cities” (Matthew 14:13). Jesus had compassion for them and healed their sick. He also performed a miracle of feeding the 5,000-plus people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

Yet Jesus did not allow even this interruption to derail His time of prayer with the Father. After performing these miracles, we read that Jesus decided it was time to stop, send the multitudes away, get the disciples into a boat, and journey to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. “When He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray” (verse 23). Jesus finished the day of service in prayer. Prayer was a priority.

The disciples watched Jesus perform these healings. They witnessed Him perform miracle after miracle and teach great spiritual truths to the people. But there was something unusual about Him whenever He came out of a place of prayer—and something about the way He prayed that they wanted to have in their own lives. Perhaps it was for this reason that one day they approached Jesus and asked, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).

Jesus’ response is what we know as the “Lord’s Prayer.” In this prayer, Jesus gives us a model for communicating with God on a daily basis. He begins by instructing us to praise God: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.” He asks for God’s will to be done: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” He instructs us to ask God to meet our needs: “Give us day by day our daily bread.” He tells us to seek God’s forgiveness and forgive others: “And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” Jesus also states that we need to ask God for strength for the spiritual battles that we face: “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (verses 2–4).

Jesus’ life is a model of making prayer a daily priority. He prayed at His baptism. He prayed when He was tempted. He prayed before selecting His twelve disciples and on the night of His betrayal. He began His day in prayer, ended His day in prayer, and prayed for long stretches of time before making great decisions. All throughout Jesus’ life He was praying to His heavenly Father—and He was God. Shouldn’t we follow His example and do the same?

7. How does Jesus’ example of praying that we find throughout the Gospels match your own pattern of prayer? Explain.

8. Look again at Jesus’ model prayer. What are some things for which you are thankful to God? What are some needs you need met? What are some ways you need His strength? Take a few minutes to write these down, and then take them to God in prayer.

PRAYER IS THE KEY TO RELATIONSHIP

Intentional dialogue with God will ultimately establish and deepen your relationship with Him. As Jesus demonstrated, the purpose of prayer is that you might know God better, experience more of His love, and have an abiding awareness of His work in your life. Talking to God doesn't build relationship. Communicating *with* God does.

A relationship with God, of course, is personal. In fact, it is the most intimate relationship you can ever know. Nobody knows you as God knows you. Nobody loves you as God loves you. Nobody desires good for your life more than God does. In prayer—in genuine communication with God—you soon discover more about God and more about yourself as God's beloved child. There is no greater exciting or enriching experience!

Your individual relationship with God is unique. This is true for every relationship that you have with another person, and it is no less true in your relationship with God. So, your prayers must be *your* prayers. Your communication with God is your communication. Written or formalized prayers have their place in certain group settings, but your times of communication with God should be marked by your own original speech. Prayer is talking with God as you would talk to your dearest friend, your most eager supporter, or your most loving mentor.

Given that prayer is intensely personal, there can be no universal formulas for it. For this reason, in this study we will not look at a series of procedures or offer a lockstep recipe for prayer. Rather, we will examine general principles that are basic to any person's prayer life. The specifics of your prayer relationship with God are as distinctive as any other aspect of your life and your ability to communicate.

As we approach this study in prayer, I encourage you to open yourself to the grand possibility that God has something to say to you that you will delight in hearing. He is eager to spend time with you and develop an intimate relationship with you that is marked by great joy. Ultimately, prayer is to be experienced, not studied. In study, we will simply learn how to better communicate with God—and to that end, how to have a better relationship with our Creator. It is an experience to be pursued and a relationship to be valued beyond all others.

9. “But know that the LORD has set apart for Himself him who is godly; the LORD will hear when I call to Him” (Psalm 4:3). What does it mean to call out to God? What promise are you given in this verse when you choose to do this in prayer?

10. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27). In what areas of your life would you like to hear God’s voice right now?

TODAY AND TOMORROW

Today: Prayer is a dialogue between God and me—not just a monologue.

Tomorrow: I will spend time this week both talking and listening in prayer.

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for the pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has taught us that early in the morning, late at night, and throughout the day we should be alone with You—being quiet and listening for Your voice. Help us to be intentional with our prayers and to make communicating with You—as a dialogue—a priority in our lives. We wait on You to do Your work in our hearts—pruning us, encouraging us, and enveloping us in Your love.

NOTES AND PRAYER REQUESTS

Use this space to write any key points, questions, or prayer requests from this week’s study.

