

What Is Prayer?



Session 1



**Ephesians 6:8; 1 Timothy 2:1; Colossians 1:9-12;
Philippians 4:6-7**

Session Objective

If God already knows what we are thinking, why do we have to pray to God? This session will explore the reasons we pray, focusing primarily on how prayer strengthens our relationship with God and one another.

Faith Statement

Question 95. What is prayer?

Prayer means calling upon God whose Spirit is always present with us. In prayer we approach God with reverence, confidence, and humility. Prayer involves both addressing God in praise, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication, and listening for God's word within our hearts. When we adore God, we are filled with wonder, love, and praise before God's heavenly glory. When we confess our sins to God, we ask for forgiveness with sorry hearts. When we give thanks to God, we acknowledge God's great goodness in all that has been provided for us. Finally, when we call upon God to hear our requests, we affirm that God is always near to us in times of need and sorrow.

—Study Catechism: Confirmation Version

Session Overview

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For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Reflect for a few moments on your own prayer life.

- When do you pray? Do you have a set practice or do you pray at random times?
- When you pray, what types of prayer are most common for you?
- Do you use formal prayers or are your prayers more conversational?
- When have you felt God's presence while in prayer?

Read and meditate on Philippians 4:6–7. How might these verses inform your current prayer life? Spend some time in prayer for your participants and their prayer lives.



Understanding the Scripture

This session has snippets from several of Paul's letters. While each letter is addressed to a different audience, the basic themes regarding prayer are the same, weaving together a picture of what prayer is and why it is important. In Ephesians, we are told to pray in the Spirit at all times. This is because the Spirit is the author of any true language of the community. It is the Spirit who produces praise, the proclamation of the gospel, and prayer. Paul asks his readers to persevere in prayers of supplication—that is, prayers for help—because prayer reinforces the unity of the church. Prayer is the common language Christians share.

In the first letter to Timothy, we find further instruction on how to pray. Paul reminds us that prayer is not a way of getting God on our side or of getting our way. The God we pray to is the God of all people, so we are not to go to prayer in anger or to ask for our own victories and the defeat of our enemies. In prayer we are gathered into a community that does not use God to settle petty disputes. Paul also reminds us that our prayers are to be joyful—not because we receive everything we want from God, but because we are a people secure in our salvation. Even in the midst of darkness, we need not worry, as Paul writes in Philippians, for we know God is always with us. We can constantly and continually go to God in prayer, and even when we do not understand we can feel God's peace. Through prayer, we become attuned to a conversation already going on in our hearts. God is in us and is a part of us, so when we direct ourselves inward in prayer, we find that we are already communing with God.



Understanding the Faith Statement

Today's Faith Statement comes from the *Study Catechism: Confirmation Version*, the questions of which are grouped around the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Question 95, the first question under the Lord's Prayer section, offers an explanation of prayer. Prayer is how we approach and listen to God. We approach God with prayers of adoration (praise), prayers of confession, prayers of thanksgiving, and prayers of supplication (intercession), otherwise known as ACTS. We listen for God's word for us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is not a wish list of things we want God to do for us, but rather the way we open ourselves up to God's wishes for us.



Teaching Today's Question

Teenagers are faced with many demands on their time and attention. In the midst of school, work, sports, clubs, and socializing with peers, there can be little time for anything else. Why should prayer be a part of their lives when it only appears to be one more demand? This session will help participants understand what prayer is (and is not) and will also help them understand that prayer is as important for their souls as food is for the body. They will also explore how prayer can foster a real sense of community.



Enter

Option A: Name That Emotion

Index cards, basket, pen

Before participants arrive, write down the names of emotions or feelings (anger, sadness, happiness, excitement, fear, and so on) on separate index cards so that there is at least one card for each participant in your group. Fold the cards in half and place them in the basket.

As participants arrive, invite each to draw a card from the basket. Have the participants take turns acting out the emotion on their card without using words or sounds while the rest of the group tries to guess the emotion. Explore the following questions:

- Which emotions were easiest to guess? Which were more challenging?
- Why do you think it is sometimes easy to know how other people feel and sometimes difficult?
- Do you have a friend or family member you know so well you can “tell what he or she is thinking”? If so, who? Do you really know what the person is thinking?
- If you know someone you care for is hurting, do you still ask if he or she is OK? Why?
- If God already knows what we are feeling, is it important to share how we feel with God? Why or why not?

Option B: Centering Prayer

Have the participants sit comfortably for a centering prayer. Explain that for this prayer they will simply sit in silence with their eyes closed, focusing on breathing and not thinking of anything. Spend twenty seconds praying in silence and then explore the following questions together:

- How long do you think you were sitting in silence? (twenty seconds)
- Did the prayer seem longer or shorter than twenty seconds? Why do you think it seemed this way?

Consider using this option for each session in this mini-course, increasing the time with each session. Notice how the length of time a person can sit in silence lengthens with practice!



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead the participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session, "What is prayer?" Encourage participants to ask and discuss their own questions that relate to this question or use the following questions to guide the discussion:

- What's the first memory you have of praying?
- Who taught you how to pray?
- In what posture were you taught to pray? (*head bowed, hands folded, hands opened, and so on*)
- Is prayer important? Why or why not?
- Does it matter how you pray? Why or why not?
- Why should we pray?

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Video Clip—*The Simpsons*

"Bart Gets an F" from Disc 1 of *The Simpsons: The Complete Second Season*, movie-viewing equipment

Preview the following scene from "Bart Gets an F": 15:39–17:52.

Explore the following questions together:

- What is prayer?
- What does prayer do?
- If God knows what we are thinking, why should we pray?

Share the following information with the group:

- Prayer is a way for us to be in relationship with God, and prayer helps us in ways we least expect.
- In this episode of *The Simpsons*, Bart is in danger of being held back in school if he doesn't pass a history test. His attempts to learn good study habits have failed, and he turns to a kind of last resort—prayer.

1. Mark I. Pinsky and Samuel F. Parvin, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons: Leader's Guide for Group Study* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 15.

Opening Prayer

O Lord, teach us how to pray. We know prayer is the foundation of our relationship with you. We want to be in conversation with you each and every day of our lives. Help us to find time to pray and to learn to pray in appropriate ways. Amen.¹

Watch the clip together and explore the following questions:

- What parts of Bart's prayer sounded like the types of prayer we hear or speak in church? (*Bart confesses he hasn't always been good, he asks God for help, he thanks God.*)
- Does Bart's prayer reflect a personal relationship with God? Why or why not?
- Do you believe the snowstorm was a miracle or just a coincidence? Why?
- Do you think Bart would still have believed in God if there hadn't been a miracle? Why or why not?
- Do you believe God answers all our prayers? Why or why not?

Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: ACTS

- Bibles, copies of "ACTS" (Web Resource 1a), pens, newsprint, marker

On a posted sheet of newsprint, draw a large table with four rows and four columns. Label the columns with the following Scripture passages: Ephesians 6:8, 1 Timothy 2:1, Colossians 1:9–12, and Philippians 4:6–7. Label the rows: A, C, T, and S.

Divide participants into four equal groups and make sure each group has a Bible. Give each group a copy of "ACTS" (Web Resource 1a) and a pen, and assign each group one of the following Scripture passages: Ephesians 6:8, 1 Timothy 2:1, Colossians 1:9–12, or Philippians 4:6–7. Using their assigned passage, have each group discuss the questions on the page. Make sure the participants understand it's OK if their passage does not answer all the questions.

If you have fewer than eight participants, divide them into two groups with each group looking up two of the passages, or do this activity as one group.

Invite each group to share their answers to the questions and place a checkmark in the columns to distinguish which of the Scripture passages teach about prayer of adoration (A), prayer of confession (C), prayer of thanksgiving (T), and prayer of supplication (S). Ask: How do all of these passages combine to give a complete picture of prayer?

Option B: Prayer in Worship

- Bibles, bulletins from a recent worship service, markers (four different colors)

Make sure each participant has a Bible and read the following Scripture passages together: Ephesians 6:8, 1 Timothy 2:1, Colossians 1:9–12, and Philippians 4:6–7. After each passage is read, ask: What does this Scripture passage say about prayer?

Explain the following to the participants about four different types of prayer that can be remembered with the acronym "ACTS":

- **Adoration:** We give God praise and credit for all God has done and will do.
- **Confession:** We admit the mistakes we have made and ask God to forgive us.
- **Thanksgiving:** We thank God for all God has done.
- **Supplication:** We ask God for help for others in need and also for ourselves.

Divide the participants into groups of two or three and give each group a copy of a worship bulletin and four markers of different colors. Using a different marker for each type of prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication), each group should mark where each of these prayers is found in the bulletin. Explore the following questions with the participants:

If possible, collect worship bulletins from other congregations in your area to use in this learning activity.

- Which prayers are found where in your bulletin?
- Are any of the types of prayer missing from your worship bulletin? If so, which types are missing and why do you think they are missing?
- Which type of prayer do you most connect with? Which type is the most challenging for you to connect with?



Express

Option A: Prayer Collage

- Newspapers and news magazines, scissors, tape, newsprint

Have the participants cut images from newspapers and news magazines that represent something or someone in need of prayer. Give each person an opportunity to share his or her images with the rest of the group. After each participant shares, lead the rest of the group in responding, "Lord, hear our prayer," while the person who shared tapes his or her images to the newsprint. Invite the group to look at the completed collage of people and situations that are in need of prayer. Explore the following questions together:

- Does it make a difference to actually see the people and situations for which you are praying?
- Did you feel more connected to the people and places in the pictures? Why or why not?

Say something like:

When we offer prayers for others it is like we are holding those people up to God.

Option B: Mirror, Mirror

Gather the participants into groups of two, assigning one person in each pair to be the “mirror” and the other person in each pair to be the leader. Tell the leaders to face their “mirrors,” moving their hands and/or legs and making faces. Have the “mirrors” mimic the leader’s movements and facial expressions. After a few moments, have the leaders and “mirrors” switch.

Gather the participants into a circle. Have one person serve as the leader while the rest of the participants act like mirrors. As time allows, continue this activity with other participants serving as the leader. Explore the following questions together:

- Which was easier for you—to be the leader or the “reflection”? Why?
- Did it get easier to follow the other person’s movements as time passed? Why or why not?
- How did it feel to do this exercise with a partner?
- How did it feel to do this exercise as a large group?
- How is reflecting another person like prayer?

Say something like:

When we pray for others we are reflecting to God the needs we see in each other.



Option A: Prayer Calendar

- A copy of “Prayer Calendar” (Web Resource 1b) for each participant, pens, table, a penny

Give each participant a copy of “Prayer Calendar” (Web Resource 1b) and a pen. Have each person create a monthlong calendar that begins with today’s date, and if anyone has a birthday in the next month, have everyone record that date on their calendar. Place one of the completed calendars on the table. Give each participant an opportunity to flip the penny onto the calendar, having everyone else write that person’s name on the date on which the penny

Closing Prayer

Loving God, go with us into the world as we set out to put our faith into action. Help us to find ways to share your compassion with the world as we seek out those who are especially in need of your love. Challenge us to keep asking tough questions as we continue to learn about you and grow in our faith. Amen.

lands. (If someone flips the penny on a date that is already filled in, have that person flip again until the penny lands on a vacant date.) Fill in any empty dates with the names of other people in your congregation or community the participants know.

Invite the participants to take the calendars home and pray each day for whoever is listed for that date. Pray for the person whose name is listed on today's date and pray the closing prayer.

Option B: Writing a Closing Prayer

Newsprint, marker

Write the letters *A*, *C*, *T*, and *S* in a column down the left side of a posted sheet of newsprint.

Help the participants work together to write a closing prayer by recording the responses to the following questions on the posted sheet of newsprint:

- Next to the *A* for *adoration*: What things would you like to give praise to God for?
- Next to the *C* for *confession*: What things would you like to ask forgiveness for?
- Next to the *T* for *thanksgiving*: What things would you like to thank God for?
- Next to the *S* for *supplication*: What or whom would you like to lift up in prayer?

Use the responses as your closing prayer by saying,

We praise you, Lord, for . . . (*insert items listed under A here*).

Forgive us for . . . (*insert items listed under C here*).

Thank you for . . . (*insert items under T here*).

We pray for . . . (*insert items under S here*).

We lift our prayers to you in Jesus' name. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the six sessions in this course that families can use after each session. Provide each family with a copy of this Web Resource.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Connections

As a group, attend another denomination's or religion's worship service. Be sure to find out about appropriate dress and etiquette before you go. Debrief the experience by discussing what was familiar and what was new to you. Were there times when you could tell people were praying? How? What was being said or done that showed it was prayer?

Spiritual Connections

Encourage your participants to set aside a specific time each day for prayer. It could be while they take a shower, before they go to bed, or whenever they can find some time alone. Consider creating accountability groups through which participants discuss their prayer discipline via e-mail or a social networking site.

Worship Connections

Invite your pastor or worship committee to work with the participants to create prayers for an upcoming worship service. These could include a prayer for the day, prayer of confession, prayer of the people, and prayer of dedication or thanksgiving for the offering. If possible, see if the group can also help lead the prayers in worship.



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