

“A Praying Life” Study Guide

This study guide covers the introduction and chapters 1 and 2.

“What’s Your Motivation?”

As we start a new year, I am sure many of you wanted to grow in some area of the spiritual disciplines. Let me guess which disciplines you picked: desiring to read God’s Word more and desiring to grow in prayer. Don’t worry, so did I. But if you’re like me these two areas go well for about a month and then begin to tail off. Why?

It may be because I am praying on my own strength and for my own glory. My wrong motivation in such a godly endeavor is me. My wrong motivation to pray is focused on my glory. I want to be spiritual and I want others to see me as spiritual. I want to put a check mark next to my daily prayer times. I feel entitled that God should answer my prayers because of all the time I put into praying. I want to fill up a prayer notebook. These things are for my glory, not God’s.

On the other hand, your prayer life may be sporadic or non-existent. This may have to do with not knowing how to pray or what to pray for. Fortunately we will talk about these things during this study. There are others who don’t pray because there is a feeling that God doesn’t answer prayers or ask why should I pray if God already knows. In these cases I can guarantee a person’s motivation is not focused on God, but rather self.

So regardless of whether you have or have not been praying, you should desire to grow in prayer for the sole motivation that God gains all the glory. He gains the glory as I have a dependent heart that knows I can do nothing without my Heavenly Father. He gains the glory as I ask my Father in faith. He gains the glory as I see how He answers my prayers. He gains the glory as I seek Him on a daily basis growing in my love and adoration of my Creator. I should strive to be diligent in my prayer life for the sole motivation of giving God the glory He alone deserves.

Periodically ask yourself, “What’s my motivation in praying?” May your heart’s desire be that you want God to be glorified in what you pray for and how you pray.

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Let's have the right motivation in why we want to grow prayerful lives.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to focus our attention and motivations upon God, for He is the reason why we long to pray.

Time of Prayer

Open your time by asking that God the Father will give you the right motivation to grow in prayer. It is not to be spiritual, not because everyone else is, nor to earn God's "ear," but to glorify God.

Questions on 1 Corinthians 10:31

1. Turn in your Bible to 1 Corinthians 10:31. To understand verse 31 we must understand what is happening in verses 23 through 30. The Apostle Paul is addressing the issue of eating that was sacrificed to idols for Christians. His conclusion is verse 31 with the use of the word, "so." Write the clause in this sentence that allows this verse to be applied to living for God's glory all the time?
2. Look up in a dictionary what the word "glory" means? What does it mean for you to "do all to the glory of God?"
3. How is this verse related to having the proper motivation in growing a prayerful life?

Questions from the Chapters

4. The title for chapter 1 is so appropriate for many of us who have tried to pray diligently, but we have not seen our prayers answered. Have you been frustrated with your prayer life? Have you felt like prayer did not make a difference? Make a list of things that have kept you and others from praying?

5. Humans were built for communication with God, but sin in our lives makes praying and communicating with God difficult. Miller says, "Money can do what prayer does, and it is quicker and less time-consuming. Our trust in ourselves and in our talents makes us structurally independent of God" (16). Do you really live a life that is solely dependent upon God? If so, how is your prayer life impacted by that? If not, how is your prayer life impacted by that?

6. Chapter 2 gives the readers a picture of what our prayers should look like. After each phrase, write down what the author is aiming for us to understand about prayer. The Praying Life . . .

Feels Like Dinner with Good Friends:

Is Interconnected with All of Life:

Becomes Aware of the Story:

Gives Birth to Hope:

Becomes Integrated:

- **Reveals the Heart:**

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

7. Write down one or two things that you resonated with from these two chapters. Why?
8. Re-read these sentences from our author, “The quest for contemplative Life can actually be self-absorbed, focused on my quiet and me. If we love people and have power to help, then we are going to be busy. Learning to pray doesn’t offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart. In the midst of outer busyness we can develop an inner quiet. Because we are less hectic on the inside, we have a greater capacity to love . . . and thus to be busy, which in turn drives us even more into a life of prayer” (23). How can these sentences be applied to your views on prayer and your life?
9. After completing the first study, what are two to three ways that you would like to be changed during this study as it relates to prayer? After you write your thoughts, close in a time of prayer.

Prayer Activity for the Week (Optional, but Highly Recommended)

Take some time to think about the relationship you have with your Heavenly Father. After some time, write following the prompt, “My Heavenly Father . . .”

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This study guide covers chapters 3-5.

There is a special relationship found between a child and a parent. You can see this special relationship as a child runs to his mother when he scrapes his knee. You can see it as a daughter feels secure knowing her father will protect her. And at times you can see huge NFL football players get misty eyed when speaking about how their mom or dad sacrificed so much for them. There is a special relationship between a parent and a child.

Jesus uses this special relationship to describe an even more special relationship, a person with the Almighty God. This first part of the book is centered upon us realizing that prayer is based on seeing ourselves as a special child in the eyes of our Heavenly Father.

Christians are not to pray out of duty, but they are to pray out of love and adoration for the Father. God is glorified when we are dependent upon Him for everything and this dependence begins with conversing with our Father.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to remember that you are a child of the Heavenly Father whose affections are for you.

Time of Prayer

Open your time by thanking God for the different ways that He has shown Himself to be a wonderful Heavenly Father to you. But for some, their view of the Heavenly Father is marred by a strained or broken relationship with their earthly father. If this is you, please take some time and bring your hurt and possibly hard heart to the Lord so that He may begin to heal you. Remember that our earthly fathers are imperfect, but our Heavenly Father is perfect

Questions on Matthew 7:7-11

1. Take time to read Jesus' words from Matthew 7 verses 7-11. Write down the three imperatives found in verse 7. Also write down the results of following the imperatives from verses 7 and 8.

“Jesus’ disciples are to ask the Father continually as a manner of life, to be constantly responsible in pursuing God’s will, and to maintain an unremitting determination in expecting the Father to answer” (Michael Wilkins, NIV Application Commentary, Matthew, 312).

2. What is the argument made by Jesus from verses 9 and 10?
3. From verse 11, how can you describe our Heavenly Father? Do you wholeheartedly believe the truths found in this verse? If not, why?

Questions from the Chapters

4. As we learn how to pray to our Heavenly Father we must also unlearn some things that have hindered our prayer lives. Chapter 3 describes four things we are to learn. Write down the four things:

#1: Learn to Come to God . . . (pgs. 29-30)

#2: Learn to Come to God . . . (pgs. 31-32)

#3: Learn to Come to God . . . (pgs. 32-34)

#4: Learn to Come to God . . . (pgs. 34-35)

Do any of these things seem strange to you as you try and cultivate your relationship with your Heavenly Father?

5. There are three ways we must learn how to talk with our Heavenly Father. Write down the characteristics for these three ways.

#1: Asking Like a Child:

#2: Believing Like a Child:

#3: Playing Like a Child:

6. Jesus needed to pray because His identity was solely defined by His relationship with God the Father (pgs. 44-45). Unfortunately we don't pray because our identity is found in other things or other people. Make a list of things that you identified with before your relationship with God over the past year. Why does our identity in other things lead Christians away from prayer?

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

7. Without looking back at the chapters, write down one or two things that stand out in your mind from these three chapters. Why?
8. Paul Miller writes, "Time in prayer makes you even more dependent on God because you don't have as much time to get things done. Every minute spent in prayer is one less minute where you can be doing something 'productive.'" So the act of praying means that

you have to rely more on God” (49). Time for a heart examination. After reading this quote, how dependent have you been living upon God this past week? What can you do to cultivate a life dependent upon God the Father?

9. As you reflect upon your life, how well have you done in cultivating deep and intimate friendships? How do you grow deep and meaningful relationships? Maybe we don't have deep relationships with others because we haven't allowed God to show us what it means to develop a meaningful relationship. Re-read the section “No Substitute for Spending Time” on page 47.

Prayer Activity for the Week (Optional, but Highly Recommended)

Each morning when you wake up, ask that God will help you to grow a thankful heart. During the day be mindful of God and His good gifts to you throughout the day. Thank Him for the sunshine and its effect upon this earth, to your friendships, to having the ability to type. Let God open your eyes so that you may see how good He is to you.

“I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!”

Psalm 34:1-3

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Hope in Helplessness

How do people achieve success in our world? For many, it's simply a matter of hard work and discipline. Whether it is school, sports, or work they see success as the product of perspiration. Maybe you have seen this in your own life. You can recognize areas that you have been successful in because you worked hard. Maybe it is your 4.0 GPA, your flawless golf swing (ok, it's flawless on your wii), your immaculate house, or your recent promotion at work.

Similarly, what methods have you tried to be “successful” in prayer? I don't mean success in a crass worldly sense, but what have you done to try to achieve a faithful and fruitful life of prayer? Maybe similar to the previous discussion you have determined that it is simply a matter of discipline and hard work. You feel like you “just need to try harder” and that will lead to a better life of prayer. Maybe with this you have relied on special methods or “tricks” that will be the key to unlocking fruitful prayer (e.g. praying at a specific time of day, having an accountability partner, using a prayer list).

To be honest, there is some truth and benefit to these approaches. Hard work is important and it is a good idea to have an accountability partner and use a prayer list. That being said, the Bible offers a different approach to a successful prayer life. It is something that is so counter-intuitive that even though you probably know it already, it is difficult to live out.

Here is the key to success in prayer; helplessness. A fruitful prayer life is grown out of the soil of our utter dependence on God. When you reach the point where in true humility, it is the absolute conviction of your heart that “apart from [Jesus] you can do nothing” (John 15:5), prayer will flourish. If the previous section was about a childlike relationship with our heavenly Father, this section is about a childlike dependence on our heavenly Father.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of the study is that faithful and fruitful prayer is born out of a life that lives in complete dependence on God.

Time of prayer

Spend some time in prayer praising God for his powerful, sovereign, loving grace that sustains your life. Then come before the Lord in repentance in those areas where you have tried to live self-sufficiently. If you need to, ask for forgiveness for how your lack of prayer often reflects a prideful lack of reliance on God. Lastly, ask for the grace to be humble and more dependent.

Questions on John 15:1-11

1. Read John 15:1-11. One of the key ideas from this passage is that true believers will produce fruit (live changed lives). But this passage is also a helpful illustration of our total dependence on God. Jesus is using an agricultural illustration here that a branch that is cut off from the vine is dead and lifeless. If Christ is the vine and we are the branches, what is this passage saying about our need for Jesus?
2. Reread verse 5. Jesus says that apart from him we can do “nothing.” Why do you think Jesus uses such an absolute (“nothing”)? Though most of us would agree with this verbally, are you truly living life with that belief?
3. How would your prayer life be transformed if verse 5 was the absolute conviction of your heart?

Questions from the Chapters

1. In this chapter, “Learning to be Helpless,” Paul Miller says this, “Strong Christians do pray more, but they pray more because they realize how weak they are. They don’t try to hide it from themselves. Weakness is the channel that allows them to access grace” (page 56). Later he says, “Less mature Christians have little need to pray. When they look at their hearts (which they rarely do), they seldom see jealousy. They are barely

aware of their impatience” (page 57). Explain what he means by these statements. If you are honest with yourself are you more like the strong Christian or the weak one?

2. In chapter 7 Miller talks about praying continuously. He says that such prayer is not born out of discipline, but “poverty of spirit.” Explain what he means by that statement. Explain how that might look when one is having a rough day at work.
3. How do you normally respond to anxiety? In chapter 8 Miller says this, “We become anxious when we take a godlike stance, occupying ourselves with things too great for us. We return to sanity by becoming like little children, resting on our mothers.” What does he mean when he says that “we become anxious when we take a godlike stance, occupying ourselves with things too great for us”? How should anxiety be the doorway to prayer?

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

4. . Without looking back at the chapters, write down one or two things that stand out in your mind from these three chapters. Why?
5. Time to look at the heart. One key idea from these chapters is that the pride of self-sufficiency will kill your prayer life. What are the areas that you are tempted to be self-sufficient in? This doesn't mean you think you are “great” in that area, but that you often go through the motions without recognizing your need for God. How is that pride hurting your prayers in that area? What are some practical ways you can grow in humility?
6. Reread the last complete paragraph at the bottom of page 66 about walking through a mall. Later Miller writes, “A praying life isn't simply a morning prayer time; it is about slipping in to prayer at odd hours of the day, not because we are disciplined but because we are in touch with our own poverty of spirit, realizing that we can't even walk through a

mall or our neighborhood without the help of the Spirit of Jesus” (page 68). What area of life do you need to be more “continuously” in prayer through (e.g. work, parenting, media intake, ministry, etc.)? How might that area of your life be changed if you were continuously in prayer through it?

Prayer Activity for the Week (Optional, but Highly Recommended)

Before you do an activity throughout the week, try whispering to yourself the simple prayer, “apart from you, I can do nothing.” Whether you are getting up in the morning, taking a test, parenting your child, or going into a business meeting, whisper that prayer to yourself. At the end of the week, journal about how that prayer affected your week.

James 4:6, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

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“A Heart Filled with Hope”

Words of comfort and counsel can seem empty. “I’ll pray for you” is a common sentiment, yet do you take comfort in these words? Do you believe that prayer will help you?

As you opened *A Praying Life* to chapter 9 and saw that this section is about cynicism and learning to trust, you may not have thought you had a trust issue. Maybe you thought you struggle with prayer because of work piling up, or because of too much school work, or because of the kids, or maybe because of plain laziness. But have you ever thought that perhaps you have a trust problem?

Miller writes that we live in the “age of cynicism” (82). Prayer is hard because of that nagging suspicion that prayer doesn’t really do all that much. We pray for something to happen, it happens, and we think that maybe it would have happened on its own. We are afraid to pray because what if God doesn’t answer? How will I know if he does?

To overcome the cynicism that plagues our age we must turn to Jesus. He is the author of our faith, the grounds of our hope, the light in our darkness, and our victory in defeat. As we look to Christ and the grace shown us on the cross, we begin to see the world through new eyes. We do not put on mere rose-tinted glasses—we put on glasses tinted by the blood of Christ.

We begin to see that Jesus died for sinners to redeem them while they were *still* sinners. We begin to see that he is bringing his church from “one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). We begin to see that God is in the business of redemption and that as he extends grace to us, we too are beckoned to take part.

As we look to Christ our hearts become filled with hope. We become people of prayer.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to help you see the world through glasses tinted by the blood of Jesus—to let go of cynicism and learn to hope again.

Time of Prayer

Open your time by thanking God for salvation in Jesus Christ.

Questions on Psalm 23.

1. Take time to read King David's words in Psalm 23. King David was no stranger to suffering. In his early years, he had to run for his life from King Saul who wanted to kill him (1 Samuel 21). Later in his life, he had to flee from his *own son* who wanted to take his throne (2 Samuel 15). Write down some of the reasons David gives for why he can have peace and hope.

King David says the Lord is his "shepherd." What does it mean that the Lord is our shepherd?

2. Miller writes that without God, our shepherd, "we are left obsessing over our wants in the valley of the shadow of death, paralyzed by fear in the presence of our enemies. No wonder so many are so cynical. With the Good Shepherd gone, we are alone in a world of evil" (88). What problems do you have in your life? How can knowledge that the Lord is our shepherd help you as it helped King David?

Questions from the Chapters

3. “The opposite of a childlike spirit is a cynical spirit” (77). How does Miller describe cynicism in these chapters?

4. Have you noticed any hints of cynicism in your life? In what ways? How has cynicism kept you from having a childlike spirit in prayer?

5. Jesus offers six cures for cynicism, five of which are in chapter 10. The sixth is in Chapter 11. Briefly summarize these six cures.

#1: Be Warm but Wary:

#2: Learn to Hope Again:

#3: Cultivate a Childlike Spirit:

#4: Cultivating a Thankful Spirit:

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#5: Cultivating Repentance:

#6: Developing an Eye for Jesus:

6. Why is it so important that we learn to trust God again?

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

7. Without looking back at the chapters, write down one or two things that impacted you from these chapters. Why?

8. Paul Miller writes, "Cynicism looks in the wrong direction. It looks for cracks in Christianity instead of looking for the presence of Jesus. It is an orientation of the heart. The sixth cure for cynicism, then, is this: develop an eye for Jesus" (96). Oftentimes it seems as if our problems are too big for prayer. From what you learned from the chapters, and from evaluating your heart, how can looking for Jesus help you overcome the cynicism of your heart?

Prayer Activity for the Week (Optional, but Highly Recommended)

Take time this week to develop your eye for Jesus. Look for evidence of grace in the people you meet, the situations you find yourself in, and even in your trials. Look for the present work of Jesus saving and sanctifying so that you may overcome evil with good.

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This study guide covers chapters 12-14

Paying No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain

A pivotal scene in the film *The Wizard of Oz* takes place when Dorothy and her companions stand before the great Wizard in his chambers. While everyone is filled with fear at the impressive display of the Wizard, Toto the dog quietly makes his way over to an obscure, curtained booth that sits unnoticed in the chamber. Pulling aside the curtain, Toto unveils a man, busily working dials and buttons. The voice of Oz booms, “Pay no attention the man behind the curtain!” but the damage has been done. Toto, Dorothy, and we all realize that the frightful apparition before them is nothing more than a machine controlled by the man. The great Wizard of Oz is a fraud. For all his reputed might and wisdom, he is revealed to be truly powerless, whose secret is exposed at the paws of a Scottish terrier.

Our prayerlessness, in part, stems from our belief that the curtain has been pulled back on God. Our culture and our cynicism tell us that for all of God’s reputed might and wisdom, He is no more than a fraud. And it is impossible to pray to a fraud.

What is the solution? As Christians, we must be skeptical of our culture’s bold assertion that it has pulled back the curtain. Instead, we must believe God Himself when He tells us that not only is He mighty and wise, but He is intimately engaged in the smallest details of our lives.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to awaken us to reality of God’s intimate involvement in our lives, which frees us from cynicism and enables us to pray.

Time of Prayer

Open your time of study by praising God for his greatness and glory.

Questions on Psalm 8

1. A praying life is the result of recognizing that the infinite God has involved himself in our lives. Read Psalm 8. How does David the Psalmist describe God's greatness?

2. While David is awed by God's greatness, he is downright shocked that the infinite God would choose to care for us, his creation. Why does this surprise David?

3. Cynicism expresses the belief that God is not working in our lives, and if we doubt the reality of God's work, then it's no wonder that we don't pray! In order to defeat cynicism, we have to have eyes to see just how extensive God's activity is in our lives. What does Psalm 8 reveal about how God works in our lives?

Questions from the Chapters

4. Miller devotes chapter 12, "Why Asking Is So Hard, " to explaining the roots of our culture's cynicism about God. While we are all ultimately responsible for our own actions and attitudes, the culture can certainly exert its influence upon us. What are some examples of our culture's cynicism about God?

5. Miller cites Isaiah 57:15 to remind us that God is both infinite and personal :“I dwell in the high and holy place [infinite], and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit [personal].” Why is this important for prayer?

6. Miller describes his mother's habit of praying for parking spaces (among other things!). God is indeed the giver of all good gifts, even small things. What are some of the small things that you need to trust God for?

7. How might prayer for the right things done in wrong way (cf.James4:3)?

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

1. What are some of the cynical lies of the world that have influenced you? It could include media, school, work, family, etc.

2 Do you have a harder time seeing God as infinite or personal? Why?

Prayer Activity for the Week

Make a list of the “small things” that you want to rely upon God for this week. Be sure to examine yourself for selfish motive and instead have a humble, thankful heart. Set aside time

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each day to pray for the items on that list. Keep a log of how God answered those prayers for small things.

“A Praying Life” Study Guide

This study guide covers chapters 15-18

“Wordy Sanctification”

After a person is born again, through faith, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, he begins a journey of having his heart transformed from following sin to following after Christ. This journey is called sanctification. It is a gradual process that each disciple embarks upon in becoming more like God’s Son.

God uses different ways to help sanctify us. He uses His Word to illuminate the sin in our hearts. He uses the preaching of the Bible to mold our minds so that we can see this life through the lens of a Christian worldview. He uses the believers in the church family to show us how to live a God honoring life. There are many other ways that God sanctifies us, but the one I want to focus on is prayer. God uses our praying life to transform us.

As we pray to God our prideful and independent hearts are exposed and we become more dependent upon Him. As our lips move, we hear our selfish desires and ask God to make our wills meld into His will. As tears run down our cheeks because of a trial, our hearts become soft as we are comforted by the truths of scripture that God is sovereign and comforting. God uses our praying life to sanctify our lives. Our conversations with God are where our faith grows roots that are deep and strong.

May you grow into Christ’s likeness this week as you turn your heart and words to God!

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is learning how to ask God for everyday things as you have your heart transformed by Him.

Time of Prayer

Open your time by reflecting on what it means that you have a heavenly Father. Focus your prayer on praising Him for how He has been such a good Father to you.

Questions on Matthew 6:5-15

1. Take time to read Matthew 6:5-15. Jesus is giving His famous teaching called the Sermon on the Mount. In these verses Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray. The first thing Jesus teaches His disciples about prayer is who they are praying to: "Our Father in heaven." Why are these four words important in praying?

2. What are the three things that we are to pray God will do (vv. 9-10)? What does it mean to pray, "Your will be done?"
3. In verses 11-13, what are the three prayer requests that focus upon ourselves? What does it mean to pray for "Our daily bread?"

Questions from the Chapters

4. The main question in chapter 15 the author is trying to answer is, "What do we do with Jesus' extravagant promises about prayer?" To help us understand this question our attention is turned to James 4:2-3. Read those two verses. What are the two dangers found in these verses? What should be our attitude towards God in "good asking?" So how does Miller answer his question? (See page 154, first full paragraph)

5. As we are encouraged to ask for “our daily bread” in chapter 16, the author says we are to pray for material things and for wisdom. How does asking for these everyday things help us to know Jesus Christ more intimately?

6. Chapter 17 offers three ways we can pray, “Your kingdom come.” Write down a description of how our prayers can expand God’s kingdom.

#1: Change in Others:

#2: Change in Me:

#3: Change in Things I Don’t Like in Our Culture:

7. The self-will is discussed in Chapter 18 in comparison to Jesus’ teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. How will acknowledging our self-will motivate Christians to pray, in particular, praying that God’s will be done?

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

8. Flipping back at the chapters, write down one or two things that impacted from these chapters. Write down how your life will be changed by these truths. Be specific in how you would like to see your life changed.

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9. Miller writes, "If you slow down and reflect, you'll begin to see whole areas of your life where you've been prayerless" (154). Take time and make a list of four to six areas. Pray for one of those areas right now.

Prayer Activity for the Week (Optional, but Highly Recommended)

Take time to meet or talk on the phone with three different people. During the conversation, pray for and be prayed for by the other person. Jot down some impressions of how the times of prayer went.

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This study guide covers chapters 19-21

Whose Story is it?

Have you ever gone through a season (or maybe you're in it now?) where your approach to prayer could be summed up by “What's the point?!” It seems like none of your prayers are being answered, nothing is going your way, you simply are going through the motions, you pray out of nothing more than a sense of duty, prayer has become an exercise in futility. Or maybe you pray with an attitude that God ought to answer your prayers. Not just answer, but if you're really honest with yourself, answer them the way you think best. You pray when you really need something, and when you need something, you expect God to answer accordingly. In fact, has prayer ever become a means to justify something you want or would do anyway?

Why do we struggle? We realize we are helpless and can do nothing without Him, yet at the same time we know we should come confidently before Him to ask whatever we want ... and sometimes we get stuck in one extreme or the other.

The problem is that we forget whose story we're living in! What do you mean? Isn't this *my* story? When we learn to understand that we are in fact living in our Father's story ... then our prayer life changes. It's no longer being disappointed over unanswered prayer, or coming with a list of demands, but it's about how our life fits into our Father's story for us.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to learn how to pray for the right things through seeing that our lives are in the hands of a loving Father.

Time of Prayer

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Open your time by thanking God for His loving providence over our lives.

Review

Part 1: learning to pray like a child – seeing God as Father, coming messy, being helpless

Part 2: learning to trust again – dealing with cynicism, keeping a heavenly perspective

Part 3: learning to ask your Father – understanding that God is intimately involved in our lives and that we can ask Him anything

Part 4: living in your Father's story

As we've been learning about the great mystery of prayer, we've looked at different facets and truths about prayer: God is sovereign yet personal; His will is done, yet we are to ask for the little things in life; He will answer our prayer, we have to ask with right hearts. We will never be able to reconcile some of these seemingly opposing ideas (does prayer change God's mind? What's the point of praying for the little things?) ... yet, we understand that all these things about prayer are true and there is a tension yet beautiful balance that exists.

As we move into this next section, realizing that all that we see going on in prayer falls under the Father's story – His ultimate plan for us-- things hopefully will start to come together. He is in control, yet He listens to our prayers; He knows what's going to happen, yet He wants us to ask; He wants right motives, yet we often come with wrong ones. Hopefully we begin to see that in the Father's story for our lives He has a purpose, and that is to sanctify us. Learning to come before Him helplessly, learning to be dependent on His power, figuring out why prayer is unanswered at times, recognizing our wrong motives – these are all part of this sanctification process.

Questions on Romans 8:28-29

1. How would you define “good” in v.28?

Good can be defined as God’s perfect plan. It is good because God is sovereign. He is the one who watches and orchestrates His will to be done.

2. What does “according to his purpose ”tell us about our life story?

Our lives are just a part in God’s overall most important plan for humanity and this world.

3. How often do you pray for what *you define* as “good” or according to your purposes?

Unfortunately I do not pray for God’s will to be done.

It is a sign of my pride and self-centeredness.

Questions from the Chapters

4. “Our prayers didn’t sit in isolation from the larger story God was weaving her life and in ours” (167). Are you daily aware of God’s larger story, or are you too caught up in your little story? What are ways we can step back when we are up to our necks in the daily grind to see the big picture?

I am often unaware of God’s bigger picture for my life. It is not having an accurate picture of God’s sovereignty in my life. I can think about God’s grand plan in the everyday. When I get frustrated, I can think about what God may be teaching.

5. Often when we are praying for others, children, loved ones, friends, we hope that they will change. What do these two statements, “Until we become convinced we can’t change our child’s heart, we will not take prayer seriously” (169), and “Our goal was tied to Emily’s faith” (171), teach us about these type of prayers?

Prayer is a reminder that we are helpless. We can do nothing. We often times only turn to prayer as a last resort, the reason is because we used up all of our other options. God is the only one who can change a child’s heart. This is a good lesson for me. God can only change my heart as well. I just don’t think that I’m the one who needs changing.

6. “The good news is that our heavenly Father trumps the failure of our earthly fathers” (177). What is Miller trying to teach us about the Father’s love for us? How should this change your prayers as you live out His story for you?

The Father’s love is perfect and we must remember to not let our earthly fathers sins get in the way. God the Father wants the best for His children. He wants Himself to be glorified through our turning and trusting in Him. God is glorified when others see our trials and how we still turn and rely upon Him to be our strength and our guide.

7. Look at the graphs on p.181-183. When you are in the desert, which graph best depicts your prayer life? Why?

In terms of my prayer life, it is probably represented by despair. The desert place is harsh and long lasting. It is hard to remind myself of God’s good gifts when I don’t see the result. I do not need to change this heart of mine.

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

8. Selfishness, the desire to live out our own stories, often hinders our prayers. We ask for comfort rather than refining trials. We pray for peace in our relationships rather than opportunities to edify, counsel, rebuke, or evangelize. We hope our children do well in school, are well-liked, and fit in rather than for the purification of their faith or for the weaning of their desires from the ways of the world. How has a desire to live out your own story affected your prayers?

I do think of my will versus doing God's will. I am fine living with a comfortable life, but God may want more of me. This is a scary place, if I don't ask, then maybe everything will stay the same.

How can we reconcile/balance “thy will be done” with “ask and you shall receive?” Is it ok to pray for things we desire? Should we learn to simply accept reality or can we pray for the things we hope for? Use the graphs in chpt. 21 to help you think through this question.

Ask and see what my heart is like when I ask. We can ask for things and see God work in them. We can ask, but know God may not give us what we are asking for. This gives me an opportunity to search my heart.

Prayer Activity for the Week (Optional, but Highly Recommended)

Take time this week to evaluate the heart motive behind each prayer request. Whose story are you praying for? In what ways do you need to adjust these requests so that you are living in His story?

“A Praying Life” Study Guide

This study guide covers chapters 22-23

Opening

Often times you will hear of a small child in their frustration say, “I am running away”. In one such instance a mother very calmly said, “Okay.” The little boy confused by her answer decided to try and make good on his promise and took his trusted blanket and made off down the street. By the time he got to the corner of his block he realized the error of his ways and returned to the mother’s loving arms.

In the same way, this child was confused by his mother’s actions and we too are often confused by our Heavenly Father’s plan. In the case of the little boy, the Mother was using this moment as an opportunity to teach her little one that safety and love can be found at home. Our heavenly Father too allows us to endure difficult times to cause us to grow, to rely on Him and His power and to point us to Him.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to be able to understand that God is intimately involved in His story and though His work and timing are not always easy to see, we can pray with hope because His good and perfect plan is ever unfolding to draw us closer to Him.

Time of Prayer

Begin by praying to God and thank Him for the difficult times in your life because of how He is using them for His glory.

Questions from the Chapters

1. Please read Matthew 15:21-28. Here we see the persistence of a woman in her desire for Jesus to heal her possessed daughter. Why do you think Jesus didn't immediately heal this woman's daughter?

2. Write about a time when Jesus' answer to your prayer was not immediate but in retrospect you could see the purpose in it.

3. The author says, "Nothing wrong with warm fuzzies, but relationships are far richer and more complex." What does he mean by this?

4. In chapter 23 there is the story of a woman who struggles with the idea of prayer. How would you biblically counsel this woman regarding prayer? What portions of scripture might you point her to?

5. The author says that, "Living in our Father's story means living in tension." What three things does he say we need to remember when living in God's story?

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

6. Write down one or two things that you resonated with from these two chapters. Why?

7. Everyone, no matter the season of life is trying to patiently endure a trial, big or small. What is one area that you have had trouble waiting on God for and how can you apply the truths of this chapter to help you trust in Him?

8. Understanding who God is will help us to wait on His plan and to delight in even the difficult times. Write down God's characteristics (you can use a resource like Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* or you can go to www.theopedia.com and search "List of God's known attributes" if it helps) and remind yourself who He is in light of your story.

Prayer Activity for the Week

Read Psalm 139 and pray through it.

This psalm should make us pray in worship, thanking Him for who He is, being filled with gratitude for how intimately He is involved in our lives and how He can see and change our hearts.

“A Praying Life” Study Guide

This study guide covers chapters 24-25

Prayer Activity for the Week (Optional, but Highly Recommended)

Write down a trial or “gospel story” that you are going through right now. Try to pray at least once per day that God would cause you to see the story he is writing in this gospel story.

How will your story end?

I remember going to see a movie with some friends in high school, but not being able to see the end of it. No, it wasn't because we were rowdy and got kicked out. It wasn't because we fell asleep. The reason why we didn't get to see the end of the movie was that the theater's equipment broke down! At some point, the image on the screen moved around violently and then it just stopped. The theater lights came on seconds later while the staff tried to fix the problem. A few minutes later, we were told that the problem could not be fixed and were given vouchers for another movie as we exited the theater. What a bummer! We weren't able to see how the movie ended.

There are times when we are in the midst of one of God's stories and we would rather have the story end early than see the wonderful conclusion that God has written for us. We don't think that the trials or suffering are worthwhile. We want immediate comfort instead of the heart change that will come by persevering through the trial we are in.

During the most difficult time in our trials, we need to make a decision. Are we going to give up on God and try to do whatever we can to make it stop or are we going to trust completely in God and do whatever we can to bring him glory through our response?

Main Point of the Study

Study written by Lighthouse South Bay Church

The main point of this study is to understand that God has written stories within our lives and he uses these stories so that we can **bring him glory and know and love him more.**

Review

Part 1: Learning to pray like a child – seeing God as Father, coming messy, being helpless

Part 2: Learning to trust again – dealing with cynicism, keeping a heavenly perspective

Part 3: Learning to ask your Father – understanding that God is intimately involved in our lives and that we can ask Him anything

Part 4: Living in your Father's story

Questions on Jeremiah 29:1-14

Read Jeremiah 29:1-14.

Jeremiah 29 records a letter that the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the leaders of Judah who had been taken into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar. This happened around 597 BC when Jehoiachin was the king of Judah. God had allowed them to be taken into exile because of their unfaithfulness. Jeremiah had called on God's people to repent for many years, but they refused. This was not the end of the story though. In chapter 29, God gives his people hope through Jeremiah's message. God promises that he has plans for his people and the purpose of these plans is to give them a future and a hope leading to blessing and an intimate relationship with him.

1. The people Jeremiah is writing to in verse 4 have been captured and deported from Jerusalem to Babylon. They are now living in captivity. How do you think they felt?

2. What promises does God make to his people Jeremiah 29:10-14?

3. What keeps you from truly believing that God's plans are better than your plans? How is God's plan different from the future and hope that you would want if you could write your own story?

Questions from the Chapters

4. On page 205, Paul Miller says, "God saves the best for last" and yet sometimes it doesn't seem to work that way – loved ones die, we don't get into the college we dreamed about, we lose our job, or our kids make bad decisions. How can Miller say, "God saves the best for last?"

5. What does it mean to be dazzled by our heavenly Father (p. 210)? What are some potential "costs" to being dazzled by God?

6. Why is a deep awareness of God's sovereignty so crucial to seeing the stories God is weaving? (p. 216)

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

7. Describe one of God's stories that you are in right now. What is your attitude about being in

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this story? Are you open to what God is trying to show you?

8. Paul Miller says that gospel stories expose our idols. What idols that hold you back from embracing the gospel story God is writing in your life right now?

9. How is the joy we find in embracing our gospel stories different from the “happiness” that comes from worldly things?

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“A Praying Life” Study Guide

This study guide covers chapters 26-28

A few months ago, we had the privilege of reading *A Praying Life* at staff meeting on Monday mornings. Though we only read it a few chapters at a time, I couldn't put it down—I read it all. It influenced how I see prayer. I'm sure you have seen it for yourself, too.

Prayer is more than recitation, it is relationship. It is more than endless droning, but dependence. It is more than praying for the “big things”, it is also praying for little things, anything, everything.

Maybe you find yourself praying more now. Thinking of God during the day. Offering up your heart, your anxieties, your fears, your joys. Saying a little prayer for a parking spot, even. Maybe you find yourself starting to develop a praying life.

These chapters were written to help you grow practically in prayer. To not just be content with *knowing* more about prayer, but to actually pray. If God is “out of sight, out of mind” with you, keep him in sight with prayer cards. If people are “out of sight, out of mind” with you, keep them in sight with prayer cards. Then they will be in sight, in mind, and on your heart.

Lighthouse is a church of sinners and sufferers. That is who we are. We cannot do anything on our own—apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5). I hope that we will begin to be a church that prays like it.

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to put what we have learned about prayer into practice.

Time of Prayer

Begin by praying to God and thanking him for this study. Pray for grace—that God will help you to have a praying life. Pray for love—that others will be on your mind and heart.

Questions from the Chapters

1. Please read James 1:22-25. What is the danger of being only a hearer of the Word and not a doer?
2. What is James getting at with his mirror analogy?
3. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to “pray without ceasing.” In light of being a “doer of the Word” and in light of what we have learned so far in *A Praying Life* how do you think you can start doing this?
4. In chapter 26 the author explains why he thinks so few of us use tools to help us in our prayer lives (lists, etc.) Why don't you (or do you) use prayer tools? What are the benefits of using a regular prayer system? What are the dangers?
5. What reasons does the author give for why using prayer cards might be a better idea than using a prayer list? What do you think of the prayer cards concept?

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Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

6. Make one or two prayer cards. Look at the author's suggestions for prayer cards in chapter 27.

7. Think about the author's example of Bob in chapter 28—are there any "Bobs" in your life that you realize you should pray for? Make a card for them.

Prayer Activity for the Week

Sit down and make some prayer cards. Pray through them.

A Praying Life Study Guide

This study guide covers chapters 29-31

When Great Ideas Explode in the Hangar

We have come to the end of our study of *A Praying Life*. How has your prayer life been different as a result of it? Perhaps for some of you, you got to think about prayer in new ways. For others, you were reminded of old truths. Hopefully for all of us, the result of this study has been deeper humility and more intense devotion to our God. Hopefully, a praying life seems like a good idea.

Beyond being a good idea, we want this study to produce a changed life. In Bill Watterson's sublime comic, *Calvin and Hobbes*, one particular strip portrays young Calvin speaking to his imaginary tiger friend, Hobbes. In a moment of philosophic clarity, Calvin says to Hobbes, "I thought I had a really great idea, but it never really took off. In fact, it didn't even get on the runway. I guess you could say it exploded in the hangar." By God's grace, let us strive to not let the beginnings of a praying life explode in the hanger. May we continue to grow in prayer!

Main Point of the Study

The main point of this study is to grow in prayer by 1) listening to God and 2) using a prayer journal.

Questions on 1 Corinthians 2:11-14

1. We are blessed to have the thoughts of God encapsulated in Scripture. But what does Paul say is necessary in order to understand the Word of God? (v. 11)

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2. If somebody does not have the Spirit of God, what will their attitude be towards God's Word?

Questions from the Chapters

3. In Chapter 29, Miller suggests that Christians should cultivate habits of "listening for God." What does he mean by this? What are the two dangers that we might fall into?

4. Miller uses Chapter 30 to encourage the use of a prayer journal. How can this be helpful for one's prayer life?

5. Miller opens Chapter 31 by writing, "Prayer is where I do my best work as a husband, dad, worker, and friend" (257). We might also add wife, mother, student, child, neighbor, etc. How is this a true statement?

Questions to Apply the Truths Learned

6. Has there been a time recently when God used a particular passage of Scripture to encourage you or challenge you?

7. Over the course of this study, what has been the story being woven through our prayer life?

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Prayer Activity for the Week

This week, spend at least five days praying with pen and paper in hand. Write down 1) what you pray for, 2) how God answered previous prayer, and 3) what Scripture may be applicable. At the end of the week, read over your prayer journal; do you see a story emerging?