

*Solitude, Silence
and Prayer*



The Springs

Jesus said to his disciples:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)

This booklet is full of insight from various authors about solitude, silence and prayer. Read one or two at a time. They are intended to inspire your reflection. Consider what stands out to you. Use your own journal or the space provided to ponder what you think in response to what is stated. Does this ring true? Is there an “ah ha!”? Does it raise more questions? The point is to find what is helpful for you, what expands your thinking and speaks to your heart, and teaches you something about prayer.

Silence and solitude, the idea of going into our rooms and closing the door, and doing nothing but communing with God, proves to be absolutely terrifying to most people. Yet Jesus invites us to stop all of the activities of our lives, and retreat to our rooms, and pray. Drawing away, entering into silence, by ourselves, somehow helps us, perhaps even frees us, to pray.

Take a minute to consider how Jesus' instruction in Matthew 6:5-6 might be helpful to you.



f we are honest, most of us have to admit that prayer is often more of an obligation than something arising spontaneously from desire. I suspect that part of the reason for this is that prayer is often presented as a spiritual discipline. Disciplines are things that we do not naturally do but feel we should do because they are supposed to be good for us. As you will have noticed, most children don't need to be told to play. It is only adults for whom play as a discipline might be necessary, and potentially helpful! But, since prayer is the natural language of the soul, there is something seriously wrong when it feels like something we should do.

“But our problem is deeper than merely thinking of prayer as something that we should do. The real problem and the core of the misunderstanding lie in thinking of prayer as something that we do. Understood more correctly prayer is what God does in us. Our part has much more to do with consent than initiative. That consent, as we shall see, is most simply saying “Yes” to God’s invitation to loving encounter. Our part in prayer is simply to make space to turn toward God in openness and faith, and with a willingness to respond to the encounter. Everything else is God’s part.” (David Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*)

Reflect for a few minutes:

What does prayer mean to you?

How do you pray?

Why do you pray?

What might be different if prayer was something that God does within us, not simply something we do?



prayer retreat is not the same as getting away on vacation; it's not simply stopping all of our vocational work so we can get away and work on what we want. A prayer retreat has times of silence and solitude as integral components because being alone and being quiet helps us connect with the Lord. Drawing away also helps us to learn how to simply "be" – how to offer to God ourselves, our attention, our devotion, our heart, rather than all of the things we do. We love to be seen doing and when we are with other people, what motivates us gets all tangled up. Who knows why we are doing what we do! Certainly we want to please the Lord, but we also want to appear "spiritual" and impress others and not look stupid. So Jesus instructs us to go into our rooms, and close the door. It's much simpler then.

Dallas Willard writes: "Every person should have regular periods in life when he or she has nothing to do. Periods of solitude and silence are excellent practices for helping us learn how to do that. The law that God has given for our benefit, as well as His, tells us that one seventh of our time should be devoted to doing nothing—no work, not by ourselves or any of our family, employees, or animals. That includes, of course, religious work. It is to be Sabbath.

"What do you do in solitude or silence? Well, as far as things to "get done," nothing at all. As long as you are doing "things to get done," you have not broken human contact. So don't go into solitude and silence with a list. Can we enjoy things in solitude and silence? Yes, but don't try to. Just be there.

"Even lay down your ideas as to what solitude and silence are supposed to accomplish in your spiritual growth. You will discover incredibly good things. One is that you have a soul. Another, that God is near and the universe is brimming with goodness. Another, that others aren't as

bad as you often think. But don't try to discover these, or you won't. You'll just be busy and find more of your own business. The cure for too-much-to-do is solitude and silence, for there you find you are safely more than what you do. And the cure of loneliness is solitude and silence, for there you discover in how many ways you are never alone.

"When you go into solitude and silence, you need to be relatively comfortable. Don't be a hero in this or in any spiritual discipline. You will need rest. Sleep until you wake up truly refreshed. And you will need to stay there long enough for the inner being to become different. Muddy water becomes clear if you only let it be still for a while.

"You will know this finding of soul and God is happening by an increased sense of who you are and a lessening of the feeling that you *have* to do this, that, and the other thing that befalls your lot in life. That harassing, hovering feeling of "have to" largely comes from the vacuum in your soul, where you ought to be at home with your Father in His kingdom. As the vacuum is rightly filled, you will increasingly know that you do not have to do those things—not even those you want to do.

"Liberation from your own desires is one of the greatest gifts of solitude and silence. When this all begins to happen, you will know you are arriving where you ought to be. Old bondages to wrong-doing will begin to drop off as you see them for what they are. And the possibility of really loving people will dawn upon you.

"Soon you may even come to know what it is like to live by grace rather than just talk about it." (Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, pp. 359-60)

All approaches to prayer are undergirded by one simple and central assumption: prayer is intended to bring us into a deeper relationship to God. Always a relationship. Never mere technique. (*Kneeling with Giants*, Covenant Companion, Spring 2013, p. 20)



have found that once all of the outer noise is reduced, and the inner noise is quieted, and I am alone, not needing to anticipate the needs of others or worry about what they might think, I feel lost. It's taken time, but over the years I have learned to love times of silence and solitude because my mind is free. I don't have to think about everything that must be done. I am free to commune with the Lord. I begin to pray.



Becoming aware of Christ's presence

(practicing the presence of God) involves developing the habit of watching for traces of the divine in daily life. “Nothing has the capacity to make all of life a prayer more than spiritual eyes that allow us to know the presence and action of God in us and in the world.

“Deep knowing of the reality of God-with-us transforms our consciousness—replacing the usual background noise associated with the endless chain of thoughts, memories and associations with a quiet, steady knowing of our being in God and our participation in the life of God. It also changes our identity as we come to truly know—not just believe—that our deepest and truest self is hidden in Christ.

“Teach yourself to begin and end your day in prayer. As you pray for your meals, set your heart and mind on Jesus. Pause throughout the day and remember that “we live and move and have our being in Christ.”

“Being aware that “Christ is in us” and that we are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3) addresses our most fundamental need to know that we belong, and that our life has purpose and meaning. (Benner, *Opening to God*, pg. 83)

“Your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” Col 3:3

Jesus said to his disciples:

*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.
(Matthew 6:7)*



ilence. “Be still and know that I am God.”
(Ps 46)

Consider starting each time of prayer with a few moments of stillness before God. Just be still, silent, and focused on Him.

Use this time of stillness to simply gather yourself before God. Your prayer has already started if you offer these moments as gifts of unworded presence to the One who is present to you. Offer your silence and stillness as an expression of your intention of making space for God—space to be truly open to God’s presence and communication.

Remember that this communion with God is really God’s initiative and work. God has already started the conversation. He wants you to know His love for you. Be intentional to receive His love and express your love in heartfelt devotion.

Centering prayer has been so helpful to me as it has enabled me to take the theological truths of Scripture and make them part of my DNA. As Benner writes, “Christian surrender is saying yes to God’s *Yes!* to me. It begins as I experience his wildly enthusiastic, recklessly loving affirmation of me. It grows out of soaking in this love so thoroughly that love for God springs up in response.”

Maybe you’d like to spend 20 minutes in centering prayer. As you pray, focus your thoughts on Jesus, seated next to His Father. You do not need to say anything, rather listen instead to the words of the Apostle Paul, written to the Colossians as words spoken by the Father and the Son, directly to you, individually: “You are my chosen daughter, holy and dearly loved.” (Col. 3:12) When you notice that your mind has started to wander, come back to being intentionally aware of being in the presence of the Lord by receiving the words: “You are my chosen daughter, holy and dearly loved.” Receive these words from God.

We need to know the depth of Jesus’s love for us. Meditating on the truth of His love by praying in this simple way a verse from Scripture will help us to truly believe it.

“As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved” Col 3:12




adly, we rarely take time to reflect on God's love for us or on the promises of heaven. As we begin to pray, this is a wonderful place to begin.

Is there something that is keeping you from wanting to pray? Do you notice that you are resisting entering into a time of prayer?

Sometimes we interpret the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in to mean that the Lord doesn't really care about us. Do not be deceived. This is a lie. God loves you.

"The devil may try to use the hurts of life, and sometimes our own mistakes to make us feel it is impossible that Jesus really loves us, is really cleaving to us. This is a danger for all of us. And so sad, because it is completely the opposite of what Jesus is really wanting, even waiting to tell you. Not only does He love you, but even more—He longs for you. He misses you when you don't come close. He thirsts for you. He loves you always, even when you don't feel worthy. When not accepted by others, or even by yourself sometimes—He is the one who always accepts you. My children, you don't have to be different for Jesus to love you. Only believe—you are precious to Him. Bring all your suffering to His feet—only open your heart to be loved by Him as you are. He will do the rest." (Mother Teresa, quoted in *Finding Calcutta*, Poplin, 136)


It makes no sense to look at our circumstances and have our interpretation of how unfair and hurtful they are form the basis of what we believe about the nature and character of God. We need to get to know the truth about who God is from the Scriptures, and then interpret our circumstances in light of our theology.

 Grace is the solid ground on which to begin our prayers. Grace allows us to examine our lives and see where we are failing to live as Jesus would have us live.

We don't need to be anxious or fearful. We can open ourselves to the light of the Spirit and allow Him to lead us as we reflect on our day in an honest and grace-filled way. When we realize that we have failed to live a life of love, we have confidence to *"draw near to the throne of grace so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* (Heb. 4:16) Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. He is our great high priest who now appears for us in God's presence (Heb. 9:24). We come to rely on our high priest and don't spend days or years afraid to acknowledge the envy or deceit, arrogance or anger, the ways we are unkind, rude, self-seeking--all failures to love--that the Holy Spirit reveals to us.

Our role is to be intentional to work with, rather than resist, the Holy Spirit.

Come to the Lord in prayer, open and receptive, humble, willing to see with grace-filled eyes what he shows us. Agree with Him.

 grace allows us to pray honestly and bring our vulnerability and sense of not being enough to the Lord. “Authentic prayer is the encounter of the true self and the true God.

This is what gives prayer its transformational potential. Honesty gives God access to the truths of our life, to the realities of our existence. Sadly, however, the self that we so often bring to God is our lying, false self—the self that we have defensively constructed to protect us from the vulnerability of our nakedness before God and in the world. God understands this vulnerability and our felt need for protection, but Jesus shows us another way to be in vulnerability and trust. This is the way of prayer.”
(Benner, *Opening to God*, 34)



Grace enables us to make progress because once we feel safe we can begin to truly see ourselves, and open our hearts in trust. Brennan Manning writes: “Wallowing in shame, remorse, self-hatred, and guilt over real or imagined failing in our past lives betrays a distrust in the love of God. It shows that we have not accepted the acceptance of Jesus Christ and thus have rejected the total sufficiency of his redeeming work. Preoccupation with our past sins, present weaknesses, and character defects gets our emotions churning in self-destructive ways, closes us within the mighty citadel of self, and preempts the presence of a compassionate God...

“In order to grow in trust, we must allow God to see us and love us precisely as we are. The best way to do that is through prayer. As we pray, the unrestricted love of God gradually transforms us. We open ourselves to receive our own truth in the light of God’s trust. The Spirit opens our eyes to see what really is, to pierce through illusions so that we can discover we are seen by God with a gaze of love. (Manning, Ruthless Trust, 16)

“Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator...” Col 3:9

*“God made you alive with Christ.
He forgave us all our sins,
having canceled the written code, that was against us...
He took it away, nailing it to the cross.” Col 2:13-15*

P rayer communion is being with Christ in intimate connection: Vine and branch, Shepherd and sheep, Bridegroom and Bride. Being “in Christ” and having “Christ in me” is Paul’s way of expressing this mystical union that is in place now, although I can become so distracted that I do not know it in my daily experience. Prayer brings me back to my true identity. I am called to be living very mindful that I am in Him.



Do not be anxious because of your helplessness. Above all, do not let it prevent you from praying. Helplessness is the real secret and the impelling power of prayer. You should therefore rather try to thank God for the feeling of helplessness which He has given you. It is one of the greatest gifts which God can impart to us. For it is only when we are helpless that we open our hearts to Jesus and let Him help us in our distress, according to His grace and mercy.

“Faith runs to Jesus even as it wonders if Jesus can do anything for us.” (Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*, 23, 34)



In the first place, it has become clear to us that the answer to prayer is not dependent upon our emotions or our thoughts before, during or after prayer. The illustration about the afflicted father in Mark 9 has shown us that plainly. His emotions were less than nothing to build upon both before, during and after his prayer. Everything seemed hopeless. The disciples had tried to heal his son, but had not succeeded. Then Jesus came. He insisted strongly on faith. When the poor father cried out in his distress, "I believe; help my unbelief," I wonder if he did not feel that every avenue was closed?

"And his thoughts gave him no more encouragement than his feelings. He has told us some of the things he was thinking about. "if thou canst do anything?" He was not at all certain whether the Lord could succeed nay better than the disciples. And when he understood from Jesus' words that it depended somewhat upon him, too, upon his faith, he despaired still more. He felt as though he were swinging to and fro between faith and unbelief.

"This is something for us to think about, we who have exactly the same experiences when we pray. We vacillate between doubt and faith. We are not certain whether we are praying right, whether we are praying according to the will of God, or not. And even if we feel certain that what we are praying for is according to the will of God, there is frequently so little earnestness and sincerity in our prayer that we, for that reason, doubt that we will be heard. We feel that it is almost blasphemy toward God to pray in such a state of mind.

"At such a time it is blessed to know that we have faith enough when we bring our needs to Jesus and leave them with Him. And though there be much doubt and but little faith in our hearts, we can do as the father did who came

to Jesus. We can begin by telling him about our doubts and our weak faith. This makes it easier for us, as we can pray more confidently.

“I need not exert myself and try to force myself to believe, or try to chase doubt out of my heart. Both are equally useless. It begins to dawn on me that I can bring everything to Jesus, no matter how difficult it is; and I need not be frightened away by my doubts or my weak faith, but only tell Jesus how weak my faith is. I have let Jesus into my heart. And he will fulfill my heart’s desire.” (Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*, 34-35)

As we come to Jesus to pray, we need to consider our state of mind as we come. The Scriptures are clear: come in faith, come in doubting, come full of unbelief...but come.



ur struggle in prayer is that we find reasons to excuse ourselves— “The more of an effort prayer becomes, the more easily it is neglected. Results which are fatal to spiritual life follow, not immediately, but no less certainly. First, our minds become worldly, and we feel more and more alienated from God, and therefore have less and less about which to speak with Him. Then we develop an unwilling spirit, which always finds pretexts for not praying and excuses for having neglected prayer.

“Our inner life begins to weaken. The pain of living in sin is not felt as keenly as before, because sin is no longer honestly confessed before God. As a result of this, again, our spiritual vision becomes blurred, and we can no longer distinguish clearly between that which is sin and that which is not. From now on we resist sin in essentially the same way as worldly people do. They struggle against those sins only which are exceedingly dangerous from the standpoint of their consequences.” (Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*, 41)

Helpful Practices

Prayer is so much more than we could ever imagine because God is so much beyond what we can ever contain in our understanding – even in our imagination. This is why St. Paul prayed to the God who “can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20).

Most of us think of prayer as praying. But prayer is much more than this. It can also include:

- Reading a passage of Scripture and listening for God’s personal word to you in it
- Meditatively walking the Stations of the Cross
- Lighting a candle in church or your home
- Allowing music to draw your spirit toward God’s Spirit
- Affirming your beliefs by reading or reciting the creeds
- Reviewing your day and noticing where and how God was present to you in it
- Allowing your hunger during a fast to draw your attention toward God
- Recalling your blessings and responding with gratitude
- A contemplative walk in the forest
- Bowing before Jesus as you remember His death on the Cross,
- and much, much more.

Some of these may seem strange to you, possibly so far outside your spiritual comfort zone that you may wonder if they are worthy of being called Christian prayer. But all have been richly rewarding for Christians across the major divisions of the Church and across the centuries of Christian history. All, therefore, are Christian forms of prayer and all have much to teach the person who desires to be attentively open and responsive to God. (David Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*)

Pausing for Reflection:

Think about the possibilities if prayer is simply opening your self to God. In what ways do you open yourself to God? How do you make space for an encounter with the Divine? How could you make these an even more regular part of your spiritual practice?



Prayer of Examen. Learning to find God in all things comes with practice in spiritual attentiveness, and it also comes through discernment. This brings us to the crucial role of the Prayer of Examen. Any experience can be examined to discover the presence of God.

Learning to become aware of God's presence in the midst of our daily experience is to know that we are not alone. It is to know that God is indeed with us.

"Being attentive to where God is in the circumstances of our lives is a rich way of allowing our knowing of God's loving presence to move into those deep places in the soul that makes all of life a prayer.

"Simply asking, "Where might God be in this circumstance or experience?" as a pondering prayer opens us to attentiveness to the Spirit that will reveal the presence of our Beloved." (Benner, *Opening to God*, 152-53)

"Pray that the Spirit would help you discern the gifts of God that the circumstances contain. The core of that gift is God's presence. All knowing of God's gifts starts with knowing the Giver of all good gifts, and God's loving presence is the foundation of this knowing. So, when we ask, "Where might You be in this situation?" in prayerful attentiveness and pondering, we can be assured that God will reveal the answer." (Benner, *Opening to God*, p 155)

As a spiritual practice the **Prayer of Examen** is meant to gently teach us how to see our own daily life in the light of grace...

I am often mystified by my own personal reluctance to remember, despite the clear wisdom and biblical mandate to do so. But the truth is that this looking backward can be pretty scary stuff for us unless we remember that God loves us first and came in Jesus Christ to bring us life. This is true no matter what has been done to us or what has not been done, what we did or did not do. Jesus's love is not conditional, and nothing we do alters its certainty or changes its total acceptance of us as we are.

Love's only requirement is that we receive it.

God's tenacious love frees us to face ourselves honestly. When we can stand and pray in this truth, we will find the boldness and courage to remember and discern our past.



f the practice of the **Prayer of Examen** is new to you, you might begin with your journal and these suggestions from Helen Cepero:

“The examen always begins with a prayer for light—to quite literally look at our own lives, as much as we are able, through the light of Christ’s Spirit. This is essential because there are two great dangers in praying through our own memory. The first is that we might romanticize “the good old days.” Consequently, we would be unable to see the truth of a less-than-perfect self or circumstances. The second danger is that we might demonize the past as essentially unredeemable and recall the past only to remember our own wounding or the ways we wounded others. When we hold tightly or even hide those wounds, it makes it more difficult for God’s transforming love to bring us hope...

“With our eyes illumined by Christ’s Spirit we can see how we often fail as human beings...But God’s love and forgiveness is unconditional and constant.” (Helen Cepero, *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*, p. 74)

“After beginning with a prayer for graced memory and understanding (light), the examen moves into a review of the past that is rooted in **gratitude** (looking back in thankfulness)...it needs to be specific, not general... Gratitude changes nothing about the circumstances of our day, and yet looking with gratitude can change everything we see.

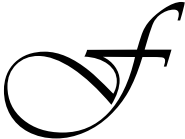
“We benefit spiritually by telling our life stories with God’s faithful love as the unifying theme.

“Review the feelings and thoughts and actions of the day (**praying into the heart of the day**), asking ourselves, what rises to the surface and catches my attention? What do I

see or notice in my reactions and responses during the day?

This practice is a daily reminder that God comes to us, and we respond to God, in the particularity of our own experiences of graces, temptations, actions and reactions... It will be your own Bethel so that you, like Jacob, just might find yourself crying out, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I didn't know it! ...How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16-17)

The prayer need not be long, only long enough to acknowledge where we experienced God's grace and transcended our own smallness, where our sin found us out, where God's mercy overflowed and overwhelmed. (Cepero, pp. 77-78)

inally, we end the examen by **letting go** of all the day's hurts and failures and missed opportunities, dropping them into the bottomless well of God's forgiveness. Then we **hold on** to the moments in which we caught the music of the Spirit and followed Christ's leading in our lives. (Letting go and holding on)

What the Prayer of Examen teaches is not that all of the past is beautiful and happy, as if we can pick and choose to build a Christian testimony only of praise music. Instead it seeks to expand our Christian musical range by helping us to pray even dark and difficult experiences, confident that God's redeeming grace is the theme even in dissonant times.

As God's grace tunes our hearing, we begin to recognize patterns of speech that make us feel helpless or powerless, inner voices that make us act out of compulsion or an attempt to manipulate others. But we also begin to listen for that truer voice in us—the things we say and do that make our lives and the lives of those around us more hopeful and free—the grace notes of a life lived in Christ. Over time, the practice of the examen brings our lives more in tune with God's true intention for us. We discern more quickly when our lives wander away from the theme and get off-key. (Cepero, p. 79)

The Prayer of Examen is not about carefully written prayers but about calling out to God. Sometimes when we run out of words, biblical psalms can provide both the feelings and the words that might elude us. Don't hesitate to write a psalm in your journal and paraphrase it to reflect your situation.



Dear Jesus, help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your Spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being, so utterly, that our lives may only be a radiance of Yours.

Shine through us, and be so in us, that every soul we come in contact with may feel Your presence in our soul.

Let them look up and see no longer us but only Jesus! Stay with us, and then we shall begin to shine as You shine; so to shine as to be a light to others; the light O Jesus, will be all from You, none of it will be ours; it will be You, shining on others through us.

Let us thus praise You in the way You love best by shining on those around us. Let us preach You without preaching, not by words but by our example. By the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do, the evident fullness of the love our heart bears to You. Amen. (Mother Teresa, quoted in *Finding Calcutta*, Poplin 113)

This, then, is how you should pray:
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
Matthew 6:9-13