



SESSION  
FOUR

SIMPLE PRAYER

## SESSION FOUR

### *Simple Prayer*

Reading adapted from *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, by Richard J. Foster

**W**e today yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We are attracted to it and repelled by it. We believe prayer is something we should do, even something we want to do, but it seems like a chasm stands between us and actually praying. We know the agony of prayerlessness.

We are not quite sure what holds us back. Of course we are busy with work and family obligations, but that is only a smoke screen. No, there is something deeper, more profound keeping us in check. It is the notion—almost universal among us modern high achievers—that we have to have everything “just right” in order to pray. Our lives need some fine tuning, or we need to know more about how to pray, or we need to study the philosophical questions surrounding prayer. We assume that prayer is something to master the way we master algebra. We want to be competent and in control. But what we really need is to deliberately surrender control and become incompetent.

#### **Just As We Are**

I used to think that I needed to get all my motives straightened out before I could pray, really pray. I would be in some prayer group and I would examine what I had just prayed and think to myself, “How utterly foolish and self-centered; I can’t pray this way!” And so I would determine never to pray again until my motives were

*We assume that prayer is something to master the way we master algebra.*

pure. I didn't want to be a hypocrite. But the practical effect of all this internal soul-searching was to completely paralyze my ability to pray.

The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives—good and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never fully unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.

### Simple Prayer

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God receives us just as we are and accepts our prayers just as they are. In the same way that a small child cannot draw a bad picture, a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer. So we are brought to the most basic, the most primary, form of prayer: Simple Prayer.

Simple Prayer is found throughout Scripture. It involves ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving and compassionate Father. There is no pretense in Simple Prayer. We do not pretend to be more holy, more pure, or more saintly than we actually are. We do not try to conceal our conflicting and contradictory motives from God—or ourselves. In this posture we pour out our heart to the God who is greater than our heart and who knows all things (1 John 3:19–20).

Simple Prayer is beginning prayer. It is the prayer of children and yet we will return to it again and again. Jesus calls us to Simple Prayer when he urges us to ask for daily bread. We never outgrow this kind of prayer, because we never outgrow the needs which give rise to it.

There is a temptation, especially by the “sophisticated,” to despise this most elementary way of praying. Grandly they speak of avoiding “self-centered prayer.” What they fail to see, however, is that Simple Prayer is

necessary, even essential, to the spiritual life. The only way we move beyond “self-centered prayer” (if indeed we ever do) is by going through it, not by making a detour around it. When we pray, genuinely pray, the real condition of our heart is revealed. This is as it should be. This is when God truly begins to work with us. The adventure is just beginning.

### **Beginning Where We Are**

So how do we practice Simple Prayer? What do we do? Where do we begin?

We begin right where we are: in our families, on our jobs, with our neighbors and friends. I wish this did not sound so trivial, because on the practical level of knowing God it is the most profound truth we will ever hear. To believe that God can reach us and bless us in the ordinary junctures of daily life is the stuff of prayer. The only place God can bless us is right where we are, because that is the only place we are!

Perhaps we have a crushing failure that gives us more than one sleepless night. Well, we pace the floor with God, telling him of our hurt and our pain and our disappointment. We cry out, “why me?” for frustration and tears and anger are also the language of Simple Prayer. We invite God to walk with us as we grieve the loss of our dream. We speak frankly and honestly about what is happening and ask God to help us see the hurt behind the emotion.

God is perfectly capable of handling our anger, frustration, and disappointment. C. S. Lewis counsels us to “lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.” God listens in compassion and love, just like we do when our children come to us. He delights in our presence. When we do this, we will discover something of inestimable value. We will discover that by praying we learn to pray.

### **A Few Words of Counsel**

First, as we begin, we must never be discouraged by our lack of prayer. Even in our prayerlessness we can

*“Lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”*

hunger for God. If so, the hunger itself is prayer—the prayer of desire. In time the desire will lead to practice, and the practice will increase the desire. When we cannot pray, we let God be our prayer. Nor should we be frightened by the hardness of our heart; prayer will soften it. We even give our lack of prayer to God.

An opposite but equally important counsel is to let go of trying too hard to pray. Some people work at the business of praying with such intensity that they get spiritual indigestion. There is a principle of progression in the spiritual life. We do not take occasional joggers and put them in a marathon. If prayer is not a fixed habit with you, instead of starting with hours of prayer, single out a few moments and put all your energy into them. When you have had enough, tell God simply, “I must have a rest.”

*“The Lord loves us—perhaps most of all—when we fail and try again.”*

Finally, we should learn to pray even while we are dwelling on evil. Perhaps we are waging an interior battle over anger, lust, pride, or greed. We need not isolate these things from prayer. Instead we talk to God about what is going on inside that we know displeases him. We lift our disobedience into the arms of the Father; he is strong enough to carry the weight. Sin may separate us from God, but trying to hide our sin separates us all the more. “The Lord,” writes Emilie Griffin, “loves us—perhaps most of all—when we fail and try again.”

### **The Conversion of the Heart**

In the beginning we are indeed the subject and center of our prayers. But in God’s time and in God’s way a revolution takes place in our heart. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, there is a shift in our center of gravity. We pass from thinking of God as part of our life to the realization that we are part of his life. Mysteriously, God moves from the edges of our prayer experience to the center. A con-

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a wonderful work of Divine Grace.

**M**ake today an experiment in Simple Prayer. Seek to keep a secret, inner conversation running with God throughout your day. Continually let him know what you are thinking, hoping, fearing, desiring. Don't try to sanitize these conversations or make them "sound" prayerful. Just share whatever is on your mind. When you discover that your mind has drifted, don't feel guilty. Simply bring your attention back to his presence.

- When you wake up, greet the Lord to begin your day. Invite him to be a part of all you do.
- When you feel joy through the day, offer thanks.
- Use anxiety as a cue for prayer. Don't try to stop worrying; simply express your concerns to God.
- Offer "flash prayers" for each person you meet. As you outwardly converse with people, inwardly pray for God's blessing on their lives.
- When you catch yourself dwelling on something evil—lust, greed, pride, etc.—don't isolate it from God. (He knows it anyway!) Talk to him about what you know is displeasing him.
- When you face problems or confusion, ask God for wisdom.
- When you feel frustration or disappointment, honestly communicate that to God. Don't censor your feelings.

Observe how this time goes. Was it easy or difficult to engage in this kind of prayer? Were there times when you thought, "I can't say that to God?" Were you able to talk to him even in the midst of a sinful moment? Did you notice anything different happening in your relationship with God as you prayed this way?

## BIBLE STUDY

**T**he first prayer in the Bible is found in Genesis 3:10. Although Adam and God certainly conversed on several occasions prior to this exchange, the first recorded words a human being says to God are found in this verse. They come immediately after Adam and Eve have disobeyed God and eaten the forbidden fruit.

1. Why did Adam say he was hiding?

What do you think is the real reason he avoided God?

What emotion was he feeling?

2. Read Psalm 32:1–4. What were the results of David's hiding?

3. What do you learn from these two examples about human tendencies in prayer when sin is present?

4. Consider again Richard Foster's words:

*There is no pretense in Simple Prayer. We do not pretend to be more holy, more pure, or more saintly than we actually are.*

How would your own prayer life be different if you really believed that?

5. In Genesis 18:22–33, Abraham has a frank conversation with God, who appeared in human form to him just before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's nephew Lot and his family lived in that city. What is the issue Abraham discusses with God?

What is Abraham's tone during the conversation?

Does God appear upset with Abraham's questioning of him?

Do you think Abraham was being overly concerned with sounding nonargumentative?

6. Moses had a similarly candid "negotiation" with God recorded in Exodus 32. The Israelites had turned their back on God to worship the golden calf that they had crafted. God's anger burned, and he intended to destroy the entire nation (vv. 8–10).

How does Moses intervene (vv. 11–13)? What bold requests does he make to God?

How do you react to Moses' forcefulness?

How did God respond (v. 14)?

7. The Bible even includes prayers so honest that they have come to be known by some as "Prayers of Complaint." Also known as "Lament Psalms," most of them were written by David—"a man after God's own heart." Richard Foster makes this observation about these psalms:

*They expressed reverence and disappointment . . . dogged hope and mounting despair . . . confidence in the character of God and exasperation at the inaction of God. . . . The Lament Psalms teach us to pray our inner conflicts and contradictions.*

—Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home

Read through Psalm 13, an example of a Lament Psalm. Does it feel in any way inappropriate to you to address God this way? Why?

What about David's view of God keeps this kind of honesty from turning into chronic complaining—or even outright arrogance (see vv. 5 and 6)? What important things keep us rooted in humility even when we are praying with this level of honesty?

8. How did Jesus model simple, honest prayer during the last day of his life?

Matthew 26:36–46

Matthew 27:45–46

Luke 23:44–46

9. Read the following three hallmark verses on prayer. Rewrite their content in your own words, stating it as if God were speaking directly to you.

Hebrews 4:14–16

Philippians 4:6–7

1 Peter 5:7

## TAKE-AWAY

My summary of the main point of this session, and how it impacts me personally:

NOTE: You will fill in this information after your group discussion. Leave it blank until the conclusion of your meeting.

In next week's lesson, the Bible study and spiritual exercise are combined into a single solitude experience. You will need to set aside a block of time for this experience.



SESSION  
FIVE

THREE TRANSFORMING

## SESSION FIVE

### *Three Transforming Prayers*

Reading adapted from a message by Bill Hybels

**Y**ou've probably seen the signs that say "Swim at Your Own Risk" or "Ski at Your Own Risk" or "Ride at Your Own Risk." I was at a cheap truck stop once and saw a sign that said, "Eat at Your Own Risk." Not a very encouraging sign!

I think there needs to be a sign, "Pray at Your Own Risk." Because there are certain kinds of prayers that can wreak all kinds of havoc in your life. They upset your appplecart, they throw a wrench into your meticulously planned future, they take you down unexpected paths. They are risky prayers, but prayers we must begin to pray if we genuinely want to be transformed.

#### **Search Me**

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me." Perhaps you've heard these words before, but maybe not in context. In Psalm 139, David was praying and he was filled with worship for his wonderful God. But as he's giving praise, something else happens in his mind. He begins picturing people who are rebellious to God—people whose lifestyles fly in the face of everything a holy God stands for. And so, in the middle of his worship, David cries out, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD. . .? I have nothing but hatred for them" (vv. 21–22).

He's saying, "I just don't get it. How could any living being refuse to follow a God as wonderful as you?"

*There are certain kinds of prayers that can wreak all kinds of havoc in your life.*

And in that moment—like lightning striking on a hot August night—the thought strikes him, “Wait! Here I am thinking about all those people out there that might not be fully submitted to God. Maybe there is a little pocket of rebellion or resistance in me. Maybe there is a dark little closet somewhere in my soul that is not fully yielded to God.” And David can’t bear the thought of that.

So, with extraordinary courage he says, “Search me, God. Test me. Expose whatever secret exists in me that is not fully surrendered. Bring it out into the light. Expose it so that by your power and grace it can be touched and removed and put out of my life, because I don’t want anything in my life to be a deterrent to my full devotion to you.”

What a prayer!

It’s a lot easier to ask God to deal with other people than it is to get on your knees and say, “God, deal with me. Deal with me.” Have you ever prayed that prayer? Are you willing to pray that prayer? It’s a high-risk thing.

Perhaps you don’t pray that “search me” prayer because you know where the Holy Spirit’s spotlight would go. Perhaps it’s a practice that nobody knows about that you’ve been engaging in. It dishonors God, it beats up your self-esteem, it drags you down spiritually—but it’s hard to let some of these things go, isn’t it? And the Holy Spirit is saying, “Let it go! You don’t want to live the rest of your life with that hole in your boat. Let it go.”

Perhaps, if you pray the “search me” prayer, the Spirit would tell you to get out of or redefine a relationship that has become an integrity issue in your life. Or the light might shine on the way you’re treating your body, or how you’re handling your money, what you’re doing with your temper, or how you are nursing your grudges.

It’s a prayer we all must pray if we’re really serious about growing. And when we pray it, the Holy Spirit will answer. He will. He’ll put the light on something, and it will get exposed. And at that moment you’ve got the big choice to make: Will you repent, will you trust, will you put it behind you, will you let it go?

*It’s a lot easier to ask God to deal with other people than it is to get on your knees and say, “God, deal with me. Deal with me.”*

Someday you'll look back over your shoulder and you'll say, "I'm so glad I prayed that prayer and that God answered it." But pray it at your own risk.

### Stretch Me

In the first century when the first church was being built, the Romans and others were persecuting the Christians. Believers were being hunted down, beaten, often murdered for their faith.

In Acts 4, we read that the core believers in that early church got together and decided they needed to pray. What do you think they prayed? They prayed, in essence, "Lord, increase our courage and our faith. We don't want to cave in. We want to take a stand. We want to be bold . . . all the way to the end, if it goes that way. Stretch our faith!"

What a prayer! If I had been in that situation, I'd be praying, "God, send guns. Improve my aim. Get me out of this mess." Instead, they prayed, "Stretch us to meet the opposition!"

Have you ever prayed a "stretch me" prayer? They come in all kinds of flavors. For example, you're standing in a long line of people, steaming with intense frustration because the line isn't moving fast enough for you. Then a thought comes to your mind. Instead of praying, "Make this line go faster," you say, "Stretch me, God. Stretch my patience in this situation, increase my self-control, diminish my homicidal tendencies!"

Or perhaps you're moving fast in a very pressured day. But you come across someone in need. And you stop and pray a "stretch me" prayer. "Stretch my compassion, Lord. Stretch my faith to believe that I can express kindness right here in this moment and that my day will still be okay. I'll get my work done. Stretch my capacity to love."

Have you ever prayed a prayer like this? "Stretch my giving, God. Stretch my heart to be able to provide resources for this person without worrying whether or not you're going to resupply my resource bank."

*Someday you'll look back over your shoulder and you'll say, "I'm so glad I prayed that prayer and that God answered it."*

This is the “stretch me” prayer—to have a bigger heart, to have a deeper faith, to be bold and take a stand when everyone else is caving in. God will answer it. But you have to pray it.

### **Lead Me**

This prayer gives us no relief from danger whatsoever. It should have a neon warning light attached to it. I know of few other prayers that can have as sweeping a set of consequences associated with it. “Lead me.”

Your life is really important. It’s the only one you have. The past is gone. You have only from this day until your last day to be on the adventure that God has in mind for you.

He leads in small ways. Throughout the day, if you’re in a position to listen, he may prompt you to encourage someone, to mend a relationship, to carry out a specific act of servanthood. Sometimes he leads in larger ways that can alter the whole trajectory of your life.

In any case, God tends not to wrestle the controls of people’s lives from their hands. Do you want to run your life? God will most likely say, “Go ahead.” But he will also say, “I have a better path. I have one that will help your life count more. I have one that will more deeply satisfy your soul.” God tends only to lead when he’s invited to do so, which is why I urge you to get to a quiet place and get on your knees and say, “God, lead my life. I only have from here to the end. Lead it.”

Search me. Stretch me. Lead me. Three high-risk prayers. Three prayers that have the power to transform your life.

*You have only from  
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ture that God has in  
mind for you.*

# BIBLE STUDY AND SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

**T**his week, the Bible study and spiritual exercise are combined into a single solitude experience focused around the three prayers presented in the reading. Schedule a time—we suggest a few hours, minimally—when you will be fairly rested and alert. If it is not possible to set aside that amount of time, consider praying through these prayers in three separate sittings.

The objective is not necessarily getting through everything here in detail, but rather to connect with God and to hear him. This is designed so you can immerse yourself—lose yourself, so to speak—in an encounter with the living God. Through times like this, you enter his realm still present in this world, but aware of unseen realities as well. Therefore, it would be better to finish only one part of the exercise and have God do his work in you than to complete everything hurriedly without having a personal experience with God.

Find a place where you will be alone, free from distractions and interruptions. Make it a place where you can be comfortable. If possible, pick a setting pleasing to you. Bring a Bible, and a journal or pad of paper to record your thoughts.

The outline below will guide you through this time, but, by all means, follow the Holy Spirit as he prompts you. Again, the goal is not just to complete an assignment; the goal is to quiet yourself before God, review his work in your life, and hear the words he has just for you.

## **Still Yourself**

One of the hardest things to do in our daily busyness is simply to stop. Being quiet usually produces boredom, anxiety, or drowsiness. But in order to embark on this exercise, you must deliberately be still. That means your body is still, your mind stops racing, your thoughts become directed instead of reactive. Don't trouble yourself with what you have to do later or what happened yesterday. You can think about all that later. If these thoughts pop up along the way, "park them" on your pad of paper so they don't interfere with your concentration.

## Invite God's Presence

Acknowledge that God is present with you right now. Thank him for his never-failing companionship. Place yourself in his hands. Ask him to help you be sensitive to his leadings. Invite him to speak to you in whatever way is most needed as you engage in the following time of reflection and prayer.

## Personal Review and Prayer

### *"Search Me" Prayer*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

—Psalm 139:23–24

Begin by turning to Psalm 139. You will be using this psalm as a guide for this exercise. Read it over a few times. Don't be in a hurry—feel free to focus on words or phrases through which you sense God speaking. Remind yourself that you don't have to be anywhere else or doing anything else.

Before you go any further, pray your own "search me" prayer. For example, "Lord, help me right now to lower my defenses and trust your love. With the help of your Holy Spirit, what do I need to see? Search me . . . know me . . . point out any offenses . . ."

In addition to just reading the psalm, consider actually speaking the words. Hear yourself saying out loud what is true from God's Word. Add your name in several places so it hits home that these words are meant for you—that God is personally speaking to you, about you.

The following questions are optional. Use them if they help focus your thoughts.

Search me . . .

1. According to verses 1–6 of Psalm 139, what specifically is God already fully aware of when it comes to your life?

Does knowing this evoke any emotions in you?

2. David was not afraid of God's scrutiny—he did not fear being judged, shamed, or rejected by God. Yet David certainly knew he was sinful. How is it possible for someone who has fallen short of God's standard not to fear God's close gaze? (See Ps. 32:1.)

Know my heart . . .

3. Jesus said our heart follows our treasure (Matt. 6:20–21, 24).  
What have you been treasuring these days?

4. According to Jesus, our words reveal our heart (Matt. 12:34)—more so than our intentions or sometimes even our actions. Think of the things you’ve said over the last week. What would an unbiased person conclude about your heart from these utterances?

Know my heart ...

5. What has your mind tended to drift toward in idle moments? Use the list below, or come up with your own word or phrase:

gratitude	jealousy	impatience	contentment
lust	envy	love	anger
joy	anxiety	greed	fear

See if there is any offensive way in me ...

6. The reading pointed out that sometimes we avoid praying the “search me” prayer because we know where the Holy Spirit’s spotlight would go. Does that seem true for you? Are you currently aware of any offensive (hurtful) way in your life? How has that impacted your self-esteem, anxiety level, or spiritual progress? What would it take for you to make a fresh surrender—to let it go?

NOTE: If you've identified an issue, we strongly encourage you to share it with a trusted friend or Christian counselor. While that may feel frightening, significant change rarely happens in isolation. Transformation is fueled by openness and community.

7. What do you think it means to be led "in the way everlasting" in these areas?

#### *"Stretch Me" Prayer*

David was certainly no stranger to being stretched. As a king, he felt tremendous pressure from internal sources as well as matters of state. Yet he was willing to walk with God through it all, and willingly accepted challenges as an assignment from God—during which new opportunities to rely on God would present themselves.

Continuing in your meditation on Psalm 139, imagine ways in which the God who inspired these words might want to stretch you. What edges of your comfort zone may God want to gently but firmly push you past? What opportunities are present that God is calling you to enter into, and in which he could show his mighty power on your behalf?

You might pray, "Lord I know you want the best for me. I want to become what you want me to become and to do whatever you ask. Here is how, by faith, I want you to stretch me . . ."

Again, the ideal would be for you to just meditate on the passage and on the "stretch me" prayer. But if you need direction, use some of the following optional questions.







## TAKE-AWAY

My summary of the main point of this session, and how it impacts me personally:

NOTE: You will fill in this information after your group discussion. Leave it blank until the conclusion of your meeting.