

SHEILA WALSH

Praying Women

BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

EIGHT SESSIONS + TWO BONUS SESSIONS
for individuals & groups



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From One Praying Woman to Another

Dear friend,

Over the last two years, there has been one thing burning in me, heart and soul: a call to prayer. But this call has not been for me alone; it's a call for all God's daughters to pick up one of the most powerful weapons we have: prayer. So often we turn to prayer as a last resort after we've done everything we can, but I believe it should be the first place we turn.

Perhaps prayer is intimidating to you and you struggle to find the right words. Perhaps you've stopped praying because it seems to make no difference. Or perhaps you are simply overwhelmed and worn out. I understand all these emotions. More importantly, so does our Father.

Wherever you find yourself today, I want to remind you that God is not looking for the right words, just a willing heart. So let's dive in together and rise up stronger. When God's daughters fall on their knees to pray, the battle is not over; it is just beginning.

Your sister and friend,
Sheila

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power
and produces wonderful results.

James 5:16

SESSION 1

Starting Where You Are

Our Prayer to God: "Help Me!"

I'd promised to be perfect, to never disappoint God, and here I was, on my face on the floor, empty. The only words I silently prayed were these: "Help me."

chapter 1, *Praying Women*

I prayed to the Lord, and He answered me.

He freed me from all my fears.

Psalm 34:4

"Help me!"

Those were the words I cried out in pain when I had come to the end of myself. I'd spent so many years trying to be the perfect Christian woman, to never fail God, yet here I was on the floor, in a small room in a psychiatric hospital, feeling as if my life was over. That was over twenty-five years ago. What I would go on to discover is that when we are at the end of who we are, we are just at the beginning of who God is. Starting where you are right now may feel hopeless and impossible, but when you invite God into that space, you will see that it's actually an open door into all God has for you.

Are you in a "help me" place right now? You're so overwhelmed that the only prayer you can muster up is "Lord, please help me!" Even then it can feel more like throwing up a white flag of surrender than a genuine cry for help. Let's face it, we are stretched so thin these days that prayer is often the last few words we utter before falling exhausted into bed. We want to spend more time in prayer during the day, but our to-do list gets longer every week, and let's be honest; life is stressful. To be alive today is to be acquainted with stress. There is good stress, like welcoming a new child or moving into a new home or job, but when most of us hear the word *stress*, it's not the joy-filled kind that comes to mind. It's the overwhelming, soul crushing kind. Let me list just a few and see which ones you most relate to.

There are work-related pressures to deal with.

There are financial concerns to manage.

Relationships always provide opportunities for stress to rear its ugly head.

You may have chronic health concerns.

Family issues may seem overwhelming

You may experience, as so many do, information overload—too much social media, too many voices, too many opinions, way too much bad news.

In a recent study, the Mayo Clinic looked at how people react to these stressful events. The results were troubling.

- People turned to anger, blaming friends, family members, and coworkers for their heavy load.
- People turned to food, at times even eating when they weren't hungry.
- People turned to self-loathing, letting negative self-talk have its way.
- People turned to substances—alcohol, cigarettes, drugs.

Although most people say that they have some belief in God, far too many people who were surveyed didn't turn to the one thing that could actually help: prayer.

Whenever you have encountered stress in life, what has been your typical response? Spend a moment considering your answer, and then complete the prompt below.

What Do You Turn To?

Complete this sentence starter:

When I find myself in need of help—because my thoughts are spinning, because my heart is heavy, because my circumstances feel chaotic and complex—my reflexive response, that thing I tend to do as if running on autopilot, is . . .

The Truth of the Matter

**Spend a few moments reading the passage below.
Then move on to the questions in the next section.**

It's one thing to understand in our minds that we have a loving heavenly Father who doesn't simply *tolerate* our requests for help but longs to come to our aid; it's quite another to instinctively turn to Him in our distress and trust Him to lead us to higher ground. And yet that's precisely what He stands ready to do.

In Psalm 34, we see a powerful progression play out.

David wrote:

I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me.

He freed me from all my fears.

Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy;
no shadow of shame will darken their faces.

In my desperation I prayed, and the Lord listened;
he saved me from all my troubles.

For the angel of the Lord is a guard;
he surrounds and defends all who fear him.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him! . . .

The Lord hears his people when they call to him for help.

He rescues them from all their troubles.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted;
he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.

(vv. 4-8, 17-18)

In response to the psalmist's prayer for help,

- God answers the pray-er
- He frees the pray-er from all fears
- He saves
- He defends
- He rescues

What wonderful promises lie in this passage! We can turn to God in prayer, knowing that He will hear us, that He will help us, and that He will sustain us day by day.

One of Satan's greatest achievements in the lives of believers is convincing us that God doesn't want to help us in our time of need. What a lie from the pit of hell to come against one of the foremost promises of our heavenly Father, that He will "never fail" us and will "never abandon" us (Heb. 13:5). God has promised to go ahead of us, to stand with us, to hem us in behind and before, and to never leave our side. God has promised always to generously listen to us when we call.

God is near.

God longs to hear from us.

God loves to help us in our time of need.

We don't have to give in to despair, wondering how we'll make it through this raging storm. We only have to pause, look up from our circumstances, and pray one single word to Him: "Help."

That's it: help.

We start where we are when it comes to prayer. And so much of the time, where we are is desperately in need of help.

I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me.
He freed me from all my fears.
Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy;
no shadow of shame will darken their faces.
In my desperation I prayed, and the Lord listened;
he saved me from all my troubles.
For the angel of the Lord is a guard;
he surrounds and defends all who fear him.
Taste and see that the Lord is good.
Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him! . . .
The Lord hears his people when they call to him for help.
He rescues them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted;
he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. (vv. 4–8, 17–18)

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

1. In Psalm 34, we come across nine actions that God takes in response to those who pray to Him. Review the text in the sidebar and write the actions on the lines below. (The first one has been supplied for you.)

1. He answers them.

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

2. David described those in need of God's aid as "brokenhearted." The Hebrew root of this word is *shabar*, and its meanings include "to burst, to destroy, to shatter, to shiver, to hurt, to break into pieces by crushing, to break down, to break off, to break up, to bring to the birth." Where in your life today do things feel shattered, broken down, brought back to their birth (brought back to the place where you first experienced this pain)?

***shabar*: brokenhearted**

To burst, to destroy, to shatter, to shiver, to hurt, to break into pieces by crushing, to break down, to break off, to break up, to bring to the birth.

3. Based on this challenging situation you've noted, which of the nine actions of God seems most necessary or relevant to you? Place a star next to the form of care listed above that you most wish God would manifest in your life today.

What is it about this form of God's protection and/or provision in your life that seems so needed right now? Write down your thoughts.

4. If it's true that God longs to listen to us, to free us from our fears, to surround us and defend us and rescue us from every trouble, then we who love God should be jumping at the opportunity to take our troubles right to Him—shamelessly and enthusiastically. When you've struggled to pray in this manner, what has the source of your struggle been?

- Not knowing what to say
 - Not believing that God wants to hear from you
 - Trouble focusing because of busyness or fear
 - Lack of faith that God will respond
 - Something else
-

5. What encouragement do the following verses offer when you're struggling to find the right words or to believe that God will answer, when you're distracted, or when you lack faith? Look up each verse and write down the promise you discover there.

Psalm 91:15

John 14:27

Romans 8:26-27

1 John 5:14

In John 15:15, Jesus calls us by an intimate name.
“I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my FRIENDS, since I have told you everything the Father told me.”

Do you see the important implication tucked inside this verse? “A master doesn't confide in his slaves,” Jesus said, the implication being that a master does confide in his friends. *Our Master confides in us.*

Isn't that an amazing thing to think about? When we are overwhelmed by life, we can go to Jesus, and He will not only hear us and comfort us and respond to us but also confide in us as a dear friend, whispering truths that we need in that moment.

Jesus is prepared to confide in us, if only we will come and be still and ask for the help we need.

Practicing Prayer

We could keep talking about prayer, or we could pause here and pray. Certainly, knowing what God's Word says about prayer is useful, but at some point, the way for us to get better at prayer is simply to pray, and pray some more, and pray still more after that, talking with God as we would with a friend—frequently and honestly.

To set the stage for the prayer we will practice here, let's look at the story from Matthew 14 that is included in chapter 1 of the book *Praying Women*.

Immediately after this [the feeding of the five thousand], Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone. Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said.

"Take courage. I am here."

Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

"Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. “You have so little faith,” Jesus said. “Why did you doubt me?” (vv. 22–31)

As the storm was raging and the winds were howling, Peter could think of only one thing to say: “Save me, Lord!”

Perhaps you can relate. When the storm clouds have gathered in your life and the rain has soaked you to the skin, have you ever turned your face heavenward and begged God for relief?

Save me, Father, I’m doubting!

Help me, Father, I’m drowning!

Rescue me, Father, I’m going under!

I simply can’t make it on my own!

What does your current “save me” prayer sound like, considering the challenge you’re facing right now? Write down the words to that prayer on the lines below.

It should encourage us to know that Jesus, who knew that Peter would falter and ultimately fail in his attempt to reach his Master by walking on the water, still said to Peter, “Come.”

When Peter looked at Jesus and said, “Lord, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water” (Matt. 14:28), without hesitation, Jesus said, “Yes, come” (v. 29).

Yes, come.

To the doubting: Yes, come.

To the drowning: Yes, come.

To the faltering: Yes, come.

To the failing: Yes, come.

To you, right in the midst of your struggle, and your imperfection, and your fear: Yes, come.

Now, you may be thinking, *Well, Jesus may have said, “Yes, come” to Peter, but there’s no way He’s saying that to me.*

We're so quick to sideline ourselves from Jesus's acceptance and grace, believing that, based on our specific fears and insecurities, His promises don't apply to us.

If this is true for you, then before you move on, take a few minutes to put down on paper the things you think are disqualifying you from Jesus's care by completing the prompts below.

I want to believe that Jesus's response to my cry for help is "Yes, come," but I always think that . . .

and I struggle with . . .

and I fear that . . .

and no matter how hard I try, I keep . . .

Be reminded that Jesus is near. Be reminded that He has mercy for you—and kindness and patience and love.

Psalm 34:18 promises God's close proximity to those whose lives are breaking apart: "He rescues those whose spirits are crushed." *Yasha* is the Hebrew word used here: "to be safe, defended, protected, preserved; to be rescued, delivered, saved."

yasha: rescues

To be safe, defended, protected, preserved; to be rescued, delivered, saved.

Just as you were “saved” the first time you fully surrendered to Jesus, you are being saved by Him daily.

If you can, let go of the to-do list that’s waiting for you at the moment and decide to sit with God. Find a comfortable chair. Relax into a settled position. Reach for a pen if you’d like to write down what comes to your heart. And then let the prompts below guide you into a conversation with your Lord.

Lord Jesus, I would love to begin our conversation in some noble way, but the truth is that my mind is racing with thoughts of . . .

These situations and circumstances have left me feeling . . .

and afraid that . . .

I read the story of You “immediately” reaching out and grabbing Peter, saving him from the wind and waves, and all I can think is . . .

I want to believe that You will rescue me too, that You will . . .

“Help me.” That is the prayer I can pray today, given my deep need for . . .

How I hope that You will receive my prayer with . . .

Lord Jesus, today, please help me to . . .

In the same way that You saved me from my sin and pointed me to the path of redemption and restoration, please save me now from . . .

I choose to believe in this moment that Your heart toward me says, “Yes, come.” I choose to claim Your promises to me that You will . . .

and that You have . . .

and that You are . . .

In Jesus’s name I pray, amen.

Yes, Come

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

“Help me!”

What a powerful, two-word prayer. When a parent hears these words from their child, their instinct is to immediately jump in and help. The truth of the matter is that our heavenly Father feels the very same way but in every moment, every day, all the time.

“Yes, child,” He says to us, “come to Me with your need.”

“Yes, come!”

“Yes, *you*.”

“Yes, now.”

“When you have a relationship with Jesus,” I wrote in *Praying Women*, “prayer isn’t something you *do*; it’s who you *are*.”

And when we start to grasp just how eager our Lord is to help us, we will instinctively . . . joyfully . . . always desire to live as women who pray.

SESSION 2

The Practice of Persistence

Our Prayer to God: "Hear Me!"

I don't know what battle you are facing right now. It may be for your child, your marriage, your health, or your very sanity, but what I want you to know is this: when we pray and refuse to give up, no matter how long an answer takes, things change. If you are discouraged, let me say, in Jesus's name, hold on!

chapter 3, *Praying Women*

One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up.

Luke 18:1

One of the most moving things that my son has ever written to me was in my birthday card last year. He wrote, "Mom, thank you that you have always listened to me." Isn't it interesting that being listened to is not something we can always take for granted anymore? Have you ever felt that even when you are sharing something that's important to you, your husband, your child, or your friend's minds are somewhere else? I wonder if when we don't feel listened to at home or in the workplace, we subconsciously assume that God isn't listening either.

Those who study the effects of technology on our lives have come to a troubling conclusion related to how much we use our cell phones and our ability to listen well. It seems that across the thirteen-year period when cell phone use went from zero users to more than four hundred million users, the attention span of those users dropped from twelve seconds to eight seconds, the latter of which is one second less than the attention span of a goldfish.

A goldfish.

That made me smile. I've had several goldfish, and I had no idea they were listening at all.

Being listened to matters. It feels wonderful to have someone truly listen to us, doesn't it? We want to know that when we pour out our heart, our listener's mind isn't wandering. Although as a culture we are more connected than ever before, we often feel more isolated and alone. If you have ever longingly thought, *I wish someone was listening*, someone is.

God whispers, "I always do."

While our actions all too often betray our lack of belief that God really does want to hear from us, that He really is committed to attending to us whenever we cry for help, the truth is that no one listens as well as God listens. He deals tenderly with our fragile hearts. He always listens well.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

If I knew, deep in my bones, that I was always truly and deeply heard by God, then this is what I would say . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

Perhaps no story in Scripture is better known while at the same time being misunderstood than the one we'll look at today. The truth behind the story is wonderful and life changing. Before we clear up the misunderstandings, let's look at the passage.

One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. "There was a judge in a certain city," he said, "who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, 'Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.' The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, 'I don't fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!'"

Then the Lord said, “Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly! But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?” (Luke 18:1–8)

With the story fresh in our minds, let’s talk about how this parable has been misinterpreted and misunderstood down through the years. If you have ever been taught that you are a nuisance to your heavenly Father when you keep bringing your needs to Him (if you still fall into this category, you may want to reread session 1 of this guide!), then the natural assumption when you read this story is that the judge is God Almighty and that, yes, He is really fed up with hearing from you! You may believe that people who keep asking God for something drive Him crazy, but because they won’t shut up, God eventually gives in. How devastating it would be if that were true. Let me say right here, this is not true!

If we slow down and understand the context that Jesus Himself provided, then we see how wrong this viewpoint is. Remember, the reason Jesus told this story in the first place was to encourage His followers to “always pray and never give up.”

Jesus was *not* saying:

- We are bugging God.
- We must quit bugging God.
- Okay, fine, if we’re going to insist on bugging God, then He’ll eventually answer hoping that we’ll go away.

As if to reinforce His point, Jesus ended His story with this rhetorical question: “Don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night?” (v. 7). The implication here is clear: God is not like a careless judge; God is a loving Father. God, who created men and women in His own image and who sent His Son to die for our sins so that He could relate intimately to us both now and for all eternity, who chose us as His beloved followers to be grafted into His family, who cannot change His feelings toward us and has loved us with an everlasting love—this God will hear us when we call and will come quickly to meet our need.

Thank You, Father, that this is who You are.
Your faithfulness endures.
Your love overwhelms.
Your provision is thorough and sound.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

In chapter 3 of *Praying Women*, you read that the first few weeks following the discovery that I was pregnant with my son were some of the most joy-filled weeks of my entire life and that the first few weeks following the discovery that evidently my son was “incompatible with life,” as my doctor had put it, were some of the worst weeks I’d ever known.

I told you that I went to the beach early one morning to pray as I’d never prayed before. I told you that I poured out my heart to Jesus and that something inside me “shifted.”

What I hope was clear was this: that shift was a shift toward *faith*. Faith no matter what the outcome was.

1. Take another look at the parable of the persistent widow and record what Jesus said in the final verse of that passage.

2. Now, look at the words of Hebrews 11:1 in the callout, a verse you may be quite familiar with. How might you recast this definition of faith in your own words?

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Heb. 11:1 KJV)

3. In the original Greek, the word “substance” is *hupostasis*, meaning “the giving of substance to; assurance; confidence.” Based on that information, what do you suppose faith has to do with persistence? How do you think the concepts are linked? (Hint: faith makes it possible to keep praying even when you don’t see an answer.)

***hupostasis*: substance**

The giving of substance to; assurance; confidence.

4. When I stood on the beach, having poured out my every last desperate, honest prayer before the Lord, I experienced a profound hard-to-put-into-words “knowing.” It was as if for the first time in a long time I *truly believed* that God was leaning in to hear me better, hanging on every word I said, attending to nothing else in the universe except me and my badly broken heart.

I hope you can relate. When have you experienced what I’m talking about here, this sensation of our heavenly Father regarding you with tenderness, inching closer to hear what you’ll say? Sit with this question a moment if you need to. We tend to let negative memories prevail. The positive ones can take some time to surface, but I’m confident you’ll find one.

When have you begged God for relief and been sure He
heard you?

When have you cried out and known He was near?

When have you confessed to Him and found Him there
to receive you?

When have you felt aware of His presence?

As memories come to mind, capture them on the lines below.

What a gift such glimpses are!

5. In the parable of the persistent widow, we see three phases related to her situation, a progression I'd like us to follow. The phases are these:

- The woman had suffered an injustice of some kind.
- She then fought for justice to be restored.
- When the one charged with dispensing justice refused to hear her request, she refused to give up.

This woman's request was a legal one, requiring input from a judge. Your request might be a relational one, as you are dealing with the actions of an inconsiderate spouse or friend. Your request might be a financial one, as you are facing bills that are greater than your income. Your request might be an emotional one, involving emotions that are overwhelming. Your request might be a spiritual one in which you're longing to feel God's presence every day.

If you and I were seated across from each other and I asked you, "What is the most pressing request you'd make of God today if He appeared before us right now?" how would you respond? Write your request on the lines below.

6. Take a moment to read the following passages. Write down what you discover regarding both the character of God and the subject of justice and mercy.

Psalm 37:27-29

Isaiah 1:17

Isaiah 30:18-19

7. When we are confident that God is both willing and able to help us, making our requests known becomes easier. On the lines below, write your reaction to this summary of what you've just read.

It is interesting to note that the parable of the persistent widow is tucked between two conversations that Jesus had with His disciples—and by extension, with you and me. Just before the parable, Jesus explained to His followers that despite everyone's eagerness to know the time and date of the coming of the kingdom of God, we are not to engage in these conversations. The fact is that nobody knows the time and date.

Then just after the story of the persistent widow, Jesus told the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector, which highlights the haughty self-righteousness of the teacher of the law and praises the tax collector's humility and brokenness.

Both before and after the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus demonstrated the foolishness of misplaced confidence in ourselves, either in meaningless conversations guessing when Christ might return or in thinking God approves of us because of our good behavior. Only within the parable of the persistent widow do we see confidence rightly placed in God alone.

It is God who first loved us.

It is God who first chose us.

It is God who promises to provide for us.

It is God alone in whom we have faith.

What boldness shows up when our faith rests in Him alone! We begin to “pray without ceasing,” as the apostle Paul tells us to do (1 Thess. 5:17 ESV), knowing with confidence that God hears—and cares.

Practicing Prayer

At last, let's pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

Father, I know what Your Word says about worry and anxiety, and yet I still find myself holding on to this one care in particular . . .

Father, will You . . .

With all my heart, I ask You to hear this request for . . .

With the persistence of the widow in the parable, I knock on heaven's door and plead for . . .

Thank You, Father, for hearing my repeated request for . . .

Thank You for welcoming me in instead of turning me away . . .

I acknowledge Your goodness, Your kindness, Your compassion by telling You that . . .

How I long to trust more fully in You than I do even now, to look to You alone for . . .

Thank You in advance for promising to bring about . . .

and for promising to empower me to . . .

I come to You today in confidence, knowing that You are . . .

and that Your ways are . . .

and that in Your hands this will be true . . .

How I love that I can keep coming to You with this request for . . .

and that a hundred times from now, still You will receive me with . . .

I love You, Father, and I thank You for . . .

In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

SESSION 3

Believing for the Unbelievable

Our Prayer to God: "Heal Me!"

If Christ begged to be released from what lay ahead, why should we think we lack faith when we pray the same way? We get to be real with God. We are invited to come just as we are, emotions raw, heartbroken, desperate.

chapter 4, *Praying Women*

"Abba, Father," he cried out, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."

Mark 14:36

In the last session, we looked at the importance of persisting in prayer, but if the situation you're praying about is resolved, then that one thing falls off your list. There is no reason to keep praying about it when you've received God's answer. But what if that doesn't happen?

What if the unanswered prayer persists, then you need to keep praying, praying, praying, over and over every day. The situation has become chronic; it's as if you have a chronic disease, literally, the long-term state of being out of sorts, of being ill at ease. Sometimes we need healing in our bodies, but sometimes we need healing in other areas.

While it's true that a chronic disease might show up as a reoccurring cancer scare or another physical infirmity, it can just as easily be a fractured relationship that refuses reconciliation, a financial crisis with no end in sight, joblessness that goes on month after month, an emotional or mental challenge that makes daily life a mountain too high to climb. These are all places where we long to find healing.

Jesus was brutally honest about the challenges in life. In John 16:33, He said, "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows." He didn't say that we might face trials and sorrows; He said that we *would*. But He also said that we should take heart because He has overcome the world.

The reason there are so many exhortations in Scripture to “fear not” and “worry not” and “have faith” and “trust in God” is that it is so very tempting to be afraid and to worry nonstop and to let doubts run wild in our hearts. In short, we need the reminders to persist because persistence is required and because persistence isn’t always the natural response to the challenges that we face.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

When circumstances leave me sick at heart, I’ve noticed that my typical reaction is to . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

One of the greatest comforts given to us on this earth is the Word of God, and the greatest gift of all is when that Word became flesh. When Christ took on human flesh as a tiny baby in Bethlehem, He walked where we walk, He experienced the heartache and betrayal we experience. Therefore, He understands our suffering. Hebrews 4:15 assures us that “this High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin.” Jesus relates to the suffering we face today; He empathizes with our situation. And because He persisted without sinning, we have a perfect example of how to keep walking by faith.

In Mark 14:34, we find Jesus suffering sorrow, His soul “crushed with grief to the point of death.” At the beginning of the chapter, it is two days until the Passover, and the religious elite are trying to capture Jesus . . . to kill Jesus . . . to silence His voice forever. One of Jesus’s own, Judas Iscariot, is the one who betrays Him. He gives up the perfect, sinless Lamb of God to the religious authorities for a bag of silver. The pace of Mark 14 picks up as we move to Jesus’s final evening in the upper room.

At the last meal Jesus shares with His disciples, Jesus foretells His death and resurrection as He passes the bread and the cup. As the disciples recline and eat, they have no idea of the drama that will unfold that night. After the meal, Jesus goes with His disciples to the “olive grove called Gethsemane,” Mark 14:32 reports, where Jesus tells His disciples to wait while He goes farther into the garden to pray. Let’s turn to Scripture for the rest of the story.

He [Jesus] took Peter, James, and John with him, and he became deeply troubled and distressed. He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

He went on a little farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. “Abba, Father,” he cried out, “everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

Then he returned and found the disciples asleep. He said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Couldn’t you watch with me even one hour? Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

Then Jesus left them again and prayed the same prayer as before. When he returned to them again, he found them sleeping, for they couldn’t keep their eyes open. And they didn’t know what to say.

When he returned to them the third time, he said, “Go ahead and sleep. Have your rest. But no—the time has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Up, let’s be going. Look, my betrayer is here!” (Mark 14:33–42)

Jesus knew what awaited Him, the humiliation, the agony, the abandonment by His Father. It is no wonder that His soul was “crushed with grief to the point of death” (v. 34). In the New King James Version, the phrase is “exceedingly sorrowful”—*perilupos* in the Greek, meaning “grieved all around.”

***perilupos*: exceedingly sorrowful**

Grieved all around.

Aware of certain peril.

Perilous.

Having grief surround you from all sides.

That is how Jesus felt that day.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

As you revisit this story of Jesus facing such unspeakable agony of body and soul in the garden, what thoughts come to mind? It's possible that reading of His Gethsemane experience brings you right back to a "Gethsemane experience" of your own, a time when you, unlike Jesus, were sure that no good could come from the circumstances you faced, when you were sure that the situation would be the end of you in some form—the end of your dream, the end of a key relationship, the end of your integrity, the end of a season you had prized.

1. When have you felt crushed with grief, aware of certain peril, grieved all around? Describe the experience.

It is comforting to note that we are not alone in our tendency to be overwhelmed by despair in devastating situations. Jesus modeled for us in the garden that we are allowed to be fully human, to tell God the whole truth, to cry out in our despair. Although His absolute trust remained in His Father, Jesus was "crushed with grief."

In the face of sickness, we need a Healer. In the face of disease, we need a Comforter. In the face of weakness, we need God's strength. And yet so often we rush past this assistance as if there is no help to be found.

2. Based on your own experience, why is it so difficult to keep faith alive when a specific challenge persists in life? What are the areas where you are most challenged right now?

3. Record the words of Hebrews 4:16 on the lines below. How might the promise found there help you to keep the faith in the face of a seemingly immovable obstacle?

4. In the garden of Gethsemane, we see an important example of how to pray when we are torn apart. Christ modeled for us His humanity and His submission to the Father's will. Reread the passage from Mark 14. Then in the space below, note the two requests that Jesus made of God in prayer after He fell to the ground in grief.

1. _____

2. _____

Yes, Jesus's first prayer request was that God would remove the suffering. We are all too familiar with this prayer!

“God, take away this cancer!”

“God, bring my prodigal child home!”

“God, help me stop fighting with my husband!”

“God, help me get rid of this debt before it suffocates me!”

“God, take this suffering!”

“God, make sense of this chaos!”

“God, please remove this pain!”

And yet Jesus's prayer didn't end there. Because His heart was fully surrendered to God, “Take My suffering!” became “Take My will.” Don't miss this. This is life-changing.

“You lead, Father, and I will follow.”

“You direct Me, and I will go.”

“You speak, and I will listen.”

“Not My will but Yours.”

“He [Jesus] humbled himself in obedience to God,” Philippians 2:8 says, “and died a criminal's death on a cross.”

But you know as well as I do that the story did not end there. Jesus was able to stand up in the garden and face the oncoming agony because He knew that He had been heard by His Father. My prayer for you is that you will be able to stand up in faith, knowing without a shadow of a doubt that you have been heard. “Morning, noon, and night, I cry out in my distress, and the Lord hears my voice” (Ps. 55:17).

5. Look up Philippians 2:9–11 and record below what God chose to do as a result of Jesus surrendering His will to His heavenly Father instead of insisting on going His own way.

6. Based on the example of Jesus, what conclusions can you draw about God's ability and desire to bring beauty from ashes, to bring *ease* to our disease?

Practicing Prayer

At last, let's pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

Heavenly Father, I can relate to Jesus feeling crushed with grief, grieved on all sides, because . . .

Dealing with chronic pain is not only frustrating but also . . .

I want to move beyond my fear and frustration, but the thing that keeps holding me back is . . .

In the same way that Jesus asked You to remove His "cup of suffering," I ask You to take . . .

I hate this burden I've been carrying. I want to feel seen. I want to feel supported. I want to feel lighter. I want to feel . . .

And yet even here in my pain I know that You are good, that You are . . .

I know that Your will for me is good and that Your ways are . . .

And so I don't end my prayer here. Instead, I ask that if You will not remove my suffering, that You will help me to relinquish my will to Yours. Help me to . . .

Give me the courage to trust You fully to . . .

In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

Declare Ease Over All Disease

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following "big idea" and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you'll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

Because of what Jesus went on to face following His time in the garden of Gethsemane—brutal death on a Roman cross, burial, beautiful resurrection three days later—we can declare ease over all disease today. Perhaps not the "ease" we long for but the ease of laying down our heavy burden and picking up Jesus's burden instead, a burden, He says, that is light. "For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light" (Matt. 11:30).

SESSION 4

Trusting God Over the Long Haul

Our Prayer to God: "Free Me!"

No marriage will ever be perfect. No parenting will be flawless. No one's sense of self-worth will ever be accurate. When we make it our quest to get to those places, that's when we feel defeated and less than. We are not supposed to be enough. That's why Jesus came.

chapter 5, *Praying Women*

When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, "Would you like to get well?"

John 5:6

At my lowest point, when I cried out to God for help, when I poured out my fears and questions at His feet, I honestly had no idea what I was asking for. I wanted the pain, the despair, and the hopelessness to go away. I didn't understand that night that my questions would lead to one of the most profound questions Christ has ever asked: "Do you want to get well?" I didn't know if that was even possible. In that hospital room that felt more like a prison, I couldn't imagine how I would ever be well again, but I was about to embark on a painful but liberating journey to learn what being well and free really means.

In his Gospel, Matthew records for us an invitation that Jesus made to a crowd one day, but what they heard was very different from what you and I hear when we read the same words. Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light" (11:28–30).

I've always read the words as an encouragement to lay everything at Jesus's feet when I'm overwhelmed and exhausted, but to everyone in the crowd that day, this invitation was life changing. Every Jew who wanted to live a life that honored God woke up every morning under what was called "the burden of the law," 613 rules laid out by Moses. That's a lot of things to get right every day—a lot of things to do and a lot of things to refrain from doing. So when Jesus told them that His burden was light, this was a whole new way of living.

Let's pause for just a moment. Does your burden feel light, or do you feel as if it's crushing you? As wives and moms, sisters and friends, we tend to take on too much. We want to make things better for everyone else, and more often than not, we end up so weighed down that it's hard to keep moving. Add to that any self-condemnation, and we're under a rock. I don't believe that's how God wants us to live.

It would be easy to view Jesus's promise of a "light burden" only in terms of our circumstantial conditions in life, but Scripture paints a far broader picture than that. For instance, we read in Galatians 5:1 that "Christ has truly set us free" and that because of this freedom, we don't need to "get tied up again in slavery to the law."

One of my favorite books in the Bible is the book of Romans. In writing to the house churches in Rome, Paul lays out the difference between the old covenant, under which God's people struggled under the burden of the law, and the new covenant, which is about the freedom that has come in Christ.

In Romans 8:1, we find that there is no longer "condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus" and that because we belong to Jesus, "the power of the life-giving Spirit" has freed us from "the power of sin that leads to death."

Later in the same chapter, we learn that once we are free in Christ, we have no obligation to do what our sinful nature urges us to do. "For if you live by its dictates," verses 13–14 say, "you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

Galatians 5:13 says that we "have been called to live in freedom" and that it is actually possible to use that freedom not to satisfy our sinful nature but to "serve one another in love."

Through the testimony of these and hundreds more verses of Scripture, we rightly conclude that the "light burden" of walking faithfully with Jesus over the long haul relates not merely to healing from yesterday's struggles, managing today's present pain, and overcoming the challenges that are sure to arise tomorrow but also to the soul's desire to live whole and holy and free. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free."

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

If I were to define freedom, whole-life wellness of soul, I'd say that it means . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

Letting God's will fully unfold in our lives—instead of selfishly pursuing our own habits and desires—is a type of *wellness* that only Christ can bring. Case in point: the lame man from John 5.

Afterward Jesus returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holy days. Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches. Crowds of sick people—blind, lame, or paralyzed—lay on the porches. One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, “Would you like to get well?”

“I can't, sir,” the sick man said, “for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me.”

Jesus told him, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!”

Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath, so the Jewish leaders objected. They said to the man who was cured, “You can't work on the Sabbath! The law doesn't allow you to carry that sleeping mat!”

But he replied, “The man who healed me told me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”

“Who said such a thing as that?” they demanded.

The man didn't know, for Jesus had disappeared into the crowd. But afterward Jesus found him in the Temple and told him, “Now you are well; so stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you.” Then the man went and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him. (vv. 1–15)

Thirty-eight years this man had been lame. You can pack a lot of life into thirty-eight years. If you're lame for thirty-eight years, you're *sure* you'll never walk again. If you're blind for thirty-eight years, you're *sure* you'll never see again. If you're mute for thirty-eight years, you're *sure* you'll never speak again. And if you're stuck in sin for thirty-eight years, you're sure you'll never be free again.

Jesus, however? He has a better plan.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

It would be easy to read the story of the lame man and come away believing that the healing afforded him was physical in nature and nothing more. But to do so would be to miss the broader point.

When Jesus asks the man if he wants to “get well,” the Greek word is *bugies*, which in addition to connoting health in one’s body means “to be true, sound, whole.”

bugies: get well

To be restored to health physically; to be true, sound, whole.

Do you want to be true?

Do you want to be sound?

Do you want to be whole?

The question is deeper than we once thought. The question is tougher to answer than we originally believed.

1. Why do you suppose Jesus asked the man if he wanted to get well? Aside from the man’s explanation—that whenever the healing waters were stirred up, he wasn’t quick enough to reach them—what might have stopped this man from wanting to be well? Hint . . . we can get comfortable in our own brokenness.

2. What do you think Jesus was really asking the man that day? Using your own words, rewrite Jesus’s question.

3. What character qualities do you think have to be present in a person who genuinely wants to be made well?

4. Describe a time when you would have answered Jesus's question with a no. What circumstances, conditions, fears, or insecurities were at play that kept you from wanting to change?

5. Which of the character qualities you noted in response to question 3 were lacking in your life at the time? Why do you think those were missing?

6. Considering the challenges you presently face, if Jesus were to appear before you now and say, "My beloved child, I see the struggles you are dealing with, and I want to help untangle you from the mess you're in, but first, a question: Do you really want to be made whole?" how would you respond?

In Mark 8, Jesus is teaching His disciples about His Father's kingdom and, specifically, what needs to happen to usher that kingdom in. He tells them that He will need to "suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He [will] be killed, but three days later he [will] rise from the dead" (v. 31).

Peter especially rejects this news. He can't bear the thought of his friend and teacher being made to endure such atrocities. And yet this is the reality. According to Jesus, these events *will* unfold.

After rebuking Peter for his lack of spiritual understanding, Jesus calls the crowd at large to come in close to hear what He has to say. "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?" (vv. 34–37).

There it is again, Jesus's care for the whole person, not just the person's body but also the person's soul.

7. Based on the passage above, what does Jesus expect of His followers? What does following Him mean?

8. In the middle of the passage, we read that Jesus says, “You must give up your own way” to follow Him. What would you say are some of the primary aspects of “your own way” these days? Why would Jesus ask you to forsake the “way” that is currently propping up your life?

9. In *Praying Women*, I wrote, “We can either back down in the midst of struggles or, by God’s grace, stand up and pray through the pain.” What do you think is the connection between our ability to forsake our own way and the phrase “by God’s grace”? Write down your thoughts.

In Romans 8:32, we read that “since he [God] did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?” This verse is a reminder of the perfect provision we find when we opt to go God’s way in life. The King James Version poses the ending thought this way: “How shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” The word here for “freely,” *dorean*, also means “gratuitously.”

***dorean*: freely
Gratuitously.**

God longs to *freely* give us all things.

He longs to *gratuitously* give us all things.

What comes to mind when you hear the word *gratuitously*?

Unreasonably!

Superfluously!

Excessively!

Lavishly!

Without logical explanation!

Think of it: the central desire of God’s heart is to lavish you with provision.

There is no better sustainability plan than that. There is no greater freedom.

Our praise of God, and God alone, draws us near to our heavenly Father, and when we draw near to Him, the Scriptures say, He will draw near to us (James 4:8). As He draws near, He brings His presence, His power, His provision to our lives, which causes us to long to praise Him more.

If you think it might be helpful, jot a sketch below of what that would look like for you. Don't worry, you don't have to be a Van Gogh! Then spend some time in prayer.

Practicing Prayer

At last, let's pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

Heavenly Father, I am beginning to see that there is a great difference between wanting a quick fix for my troubling circumstances and wanting to be made totally and completely "whole." I would describe the difference this way . . .

I come to You today aware that to know the whole-person wellness I say I want, I need to lay down some things. For starters, I must lay down . . .

The primary emotion that rises to the surface as I consider laying down the “way” I’ve been following is . . .

which I’m sure is present because . . .

As I sit before You, contemplating this shift in “ways,” would You in Your great graciousness please give me an infusion of . . .

And when I falter later today, or later this week, or later this year, wondering if Your way really is the best way for me to live my life, would You please remind me of . . .

In Jesus’s name I pray, amen.

So That We May Be Made Whole

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

In Isaiah 53, the prophet reminds us of the truth about our Master, Jesus, saying, “There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins!” (vv. 2–4).

And then in verse 5, as if to counter these false beliefs about the Messiah, the prophet says, "But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed."

He was beaten so we could be whole. The King James Version says that "the chastisement of our peace was upon him." And yet Jesus bore that weight gladly. He took on the full punishment for our sin as though He Himself deserved it, knowing that this profound act of ultimate atoning service was the only way to get us to God.

Why did He do it?

So that we could be whole, free.

So that today and every day wholeness would characterize
our lives.

So that even in the darkest of valleys we could remember
who, and whose, we are and so that with the great hymn
writer of old we might say, "Even so, it is well with my soul."

SESSION 5

The Proximity Principle

Our Prayer to God: "You Are Near."

If you have been waiting for a long time and God has been silent, let me ask you this: Do you still believe He loves you? When answers don't come, do you still believe He is for you? Jesus asked if He will find faith among us when He returns. Will He? Do you believe God is in control?

chapter 6, *Praying Women*

The one thing I ask of the Lord—the thing I seek most—is to
live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Psalm 27:4

After my father's death when I was five, my mum became the anchor in my life. She was in the kitchen fixing breakfast every morning when I woke up, and she was there when I got home from school. When I fell out of trees or off my bike (tomboy by nature) she was there. She was the one who led me into a relationship with Jesus when I was eleven and prayed over me every night as I went to sleep, yet when I was sixteen it seemed as if I was going to lose her as well. Serious health issues required a surgery that would take ten hours. I sat with my grandma, sister, and brother in the waiting room for the first four and then I left and walked down to the ocean where we lived. I felt so alone. What would I do if something happened to her? Who would pray for me when I felt lost? As I stood at the water's edge that day, I heard God speak to me, not an audible voice but an unmistakable one, "I AM here." I was not alone and I never would be.

There is perhaps nothing more terrifying for a person than to believe that she is really and truly alone. I'm not talking about those who love having time to themselves. They are introverts who recharge in isolation, and I am one of them. Our best friends are a good book, a dog, a cup of tea, and a warm blanket.

But that's not the same as *feeling alone*. *Choosing* alone-ness is far different from *suffering* alone-ness.

After I've spoken all weekend at a conference, I like to hibernate for a day or so, but then I'm back out in the world with my husband, my son, and my friends. We all want to know that we belong somewhere, that we would be missed. Just like in that familiar old refrain from the sitcom *Cheers*, we all want a place where everyone knows our name. Living without real connection is unbearable. At times we may feel as if we are connected through social media, but "followers" is not the same as friends.

Worse still, when we sink deep into the belief that we are physically and emotionally alone in the world, our spiritual lives take a hit. We start thinking that just as no flesh-and-blood person is "with us" in life, God is far away too.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

If I were to put into words how it feels when God seems distant, uninvolved, silent, and removed, I would say . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

In the first four sessions, we looked at four key cries of our hearts: to be *helped* by God, to be *heard* by God, to be *healed* by God, and to be *freed* by God. In these last four sessions, we will remind ourselves of four truths *about* God, realities that perfectly and completely address those four heart cries.

- God is near.
- God is powerful.
- God is our protection.
- God has won.

As we continue to practice laying down "our way" and allowing God to guide our steps, we will become increasingly aware of these truths. We will more readily sense—and respond to—God's presence. We will more naturally lean in to His power. We will more freely surrender to His guardianship. We will rest assured that victory is ours.

So let's look at the first reality, the reality that God is near. So much loneliness could be banished if believers embraced the idea that they are never, ever alone! God's presence surrounds us and envelopes us. He hems us in behind and before. He moves in and through us, prompting and directing our thoughts and actions, compelling us toward righteousness, loving us each step of the way.

In *Praying Women*, we looked briefly at the story of Abram and Sarai, two people who said yes to going God's way but who sensed a sort of spiritual distance set in. What did they do when it seemed as though God had abandoned them? What choices did they make? What blessings did they forfeit with those choices? What can we learn from them?

To refresh our memory of all that happened to them, let's look at Genesis 12:1–3.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

Now, before we go any further, what questions do you think it would have been reasonable for Abram to ask God at this point? What details might Abram have been curious about? Write down your thoughts.

If more information was given to Abram about how this grand plan of God's was going to work out, it certainly doesn't show up in the text. As is so often the case when following God, we are handed only the details we need for the moment. We are shown not the entire journey ahead but only where to plant our very next step.

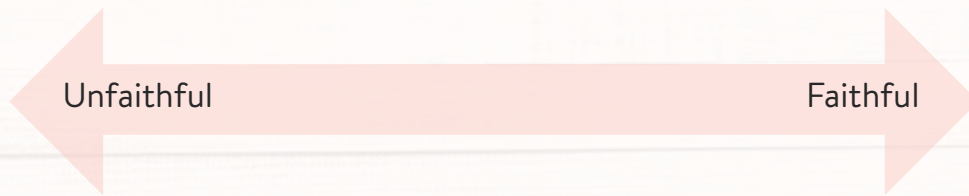
An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

Use Genesis 12–16 to answer the questions below.

1. Even though Abram had precious little information to go on, what does Genesis 12:4 say about how he responded initially to God?
-
-

2. Continue reading Genesis 12, paying close attention to verses 5–9. Based on the events recorded, how would you describe Abram’s level of faithfulness to God’s instruction and direction? Note your response on the continuum below.



3. Now read Genesis 15:5–6. What was the covenant promise God made to Abram, and what was Abram’s response?

4. What complicating factor to God’s promise does Genesis 16:1 introduce?

5. Like Abram and Sarai, we have two options for how to respond whenever we receive direction from God. Either we can persist in His plans for us, or we can lose heart partway down the path and veer off on a course we set. Considering Genesis 16:2–6, which option did Abram and Sarai choose?

6. If you had access to Abram’s and Sarai’s thought processes regarding the course of action they chose at this point in the story, what justification for their actions do you think you’d find?

7. What assumption(s) do you think Abram and Sarai were making about God when they chose to take matters into their own hands?

8. Have you ever sensed that God had forgotten you or abandoned you? When have you been tempted to take matters into your own hands? What assumptions about God’s proximity to you, care for you, commitment to you were you tempted to make? Describe the situation below.

When God first called Abram into his plan in Genesis 12:2–3, that plan consisted of four components:

- I [God] will make you [Abram] into a great nation.
- I will bless you.
- I will bless those who bless you (and curse those who treat you with contempt).
- I will bless all the families of the earth through you.

This was the information that God provided to Abram and, by extension, to his wife, Sarai. As we noted earlier, there was plenty that God didn't address.

"When will You do this?" Abram and Sarai surely wondered.

"How will You do this?"

"What exactly will this mean for us?"

When Abram and Sarai didn't receive answers to these pressing questions, they figured they'd come up with answers of their own.

"We tend to measure our understanding of God's ways and will by the outcome we see," I wrote in *Praying Women*, "but God is far more interested in who we are becoming in the waiting."

Based on the lack of outcomes they saw, Abram and Sarai began to lose hope that God would make good on the promises He had made. It's a risk you and I face as well.

When we can't see what God is doing, we start believing
He's not at work.

When we can't hear what God is saying, we start believing
He's not speaking to us.

When we can't sense how God is moving, we start
believing He's left our side.

And yet Scripture tells us that these beliefs are not true, that God is always working on our behalf. Proverbs 3:5–6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take."

God *will* show us the path to take.
He *will* direct our steps.
He *will* lead us to a “pleasant and prosperous” end,
as the word *yashar* attests.

yashar: direct

**To be right, even, pleasant,
prosperous.**

God is near.
He is among us.
He is for us.
His care runs deep.
He will do all the things He has promised to do, in His own time and in His
own way.

Practicing Prayer

**At last, let’s pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord.
Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking
them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.**

Today, Father, please remind me of the truth of the matter, which is that You are near, You are here, and You are working on my behalf. I’ve never been alone, I’ll never be alone, and I’m certainly not alone now. As I consider that reality—that Your presence is with me wherever I go—the thought that comes to mind is . . .

Father, thank You for the truth of Romans 8:28, which says that You are causing everything to work together for my good, because I love You. Thank You for committing to draw near to me as I am faithful to draw near to You. Thank You for Your thoughts, which are higher than my thoughts. And for Your ways, which are higher than my ways. Thank You for promising that as I seek You, I will find You, that You will always be near.

From a posture of gratitude, I humbly ask You to . . .

I pray that You will help me to remember that You are . . .

In light of Your commitment to reveal Your path for me, day by day and step by step, I commit to . . .

In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

The One Thing We Crave

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

In Psalm 27, the psalmist declares that out of all the possible requests he could make of God, if he could have *just one thing*, he would ask for close proximity to his heavenly Father, the unwavering knowledge that God, in His glory, was *near*. “The one thing I ask of the LORD—the thing I seek most,” verse 4 says, “is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, delighting in the LORD’s perfections and meditating in his Temple.”

Consider what your “one thing” would be were God to grant you a singular request.

What did the psalmist expect he would find in the house of the Lord?

What do you suppose it looks like to “delight in the LORD’s perfections”?

Were you to meditate in God’s temple, what would you choose to focus on?

The Lord is at hand, and He can be trusted. He is good, and He is God. He is caring, and He is active, faithfully working on your behalf. Most important to remember, you are not alone.

SESSION 6

Praying God's Word Back to Him

Our Prayer to God: "You Are Powerful."

It doesn't matter if we are nine or ninety, if we've walked with Jesus for fifty years or met Him last night, when we pray the Word of God, we are praying with power.

chapter 7, *Praying Women*

Put the Lord in remembrance of His promises,
keep not silence.
Isaiah 62:6 (AMPC)

Imagine driving through an unfamiliar city and realizing that your phone, which is equipped with GPS technology, is dead and therefore no use to you.

Or imagine a wild thunderstorm barreling through town, knocking out your electricity. You reach for the one flashlight in your home only to discover that the batteries have run down.

Or imagine you're hungry and you find a bag of Oreos in your pantry, but it's empty since your son beat you to it! (Don't ask me how I know this)

It's one thing to have a helpful resource nearby; it's quite another for that resource to provide the assistance you need.

In the last session, we remembered that God is near, and while that is amazing news, even better news exists: God is powerful to save. The best news of all? We can tap into that unparalleled power anytime, any day, by praying God's Word back to Him. That may be a new thought to you. You've read God's Word, even studied God's Word, but have you ever prayed God's Word back to Him? This has been life changing for me. There are days when I can't find the words to say everything I want to say to God, but He has given us our very own prayer book. I use the Psalms to put words to my prayers on the good days and the hard days. There is power when we pray the Word of God back to Him.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

When I think about the phrase “praying with power,” the words or images that come to mind are . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spent a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, as preparation for His earthly ministry, He was led into the wilderness, where He fasted for forty days and forty nights. Matthew 4:2 says that during that time Jesus “became very hungry.” While Jesus was in this state of physical weakness, Satan came to tempt Him. The text says, “The devil came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread’” (v. 3).

Jesus would not be fooled. “No!” He said. “The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (v. 4).

Next, the devil led Jesus “to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, “He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone”’” (vv. 5–6).

Once again, Jesus used the Word of God to combat the enemy of God: “Jesus responded, ‘The Scriptures also say, “You must not test the LORD your God”’” (v. 7).

A third time the devil tried to persuade Jesus to sin. “Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ‘I will give it all to you,’ he said, ‘if you will kneel down and worship me’” (vv. 8–9).

And a third time, Jesus quoted the Scriptures: “Get out of here, Satan, . . . for the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him’” (v. 10).

Three temptations met with three powerful infusions of truth, and in response, verse 11 says, “the devil went away.”

There is an important lesson here for us to learn. God's Word is *formidable*. It is *powerful*. It is *life giving* when we are in need.

The writer of the book of Hebrews speaks of the Scriptures as being "living and active and full of power [making it operative, energizing, and effective]. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as the division of the soul and spirit [the completeness of a person], and of both joints and marrow [the deepest parts of our nature], exposing and judging the very thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12 AMP).

Alive.

Active.

Available for immediate use.

For the praying woman looking for power, the Word of God is the ultimate source.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

I've noticed an interesting dynamic at play where the Word of God is concerned. While most people long for the power it provides, they don't always want to do the daily work needed to obtain it.

1. In the verse below, circle the adjectives and underline the verbs.

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. (Heb. 4:12)

Alive!

Powerful!

Sharper than the sharpest sword!

Yes, we want these things! But do we want them badly enough to endure being “cut” and being “exposed”? This sounds like a painful proposition, doesn’t it? One we’d rather avoid.

In the original text, “cutting” is rendered *diikneomai*, meaning “to reach through.” The image is one of reaching through the superficial to the deeper layers beneath. As it relates to the Word of God, think of God’s truth being able to look past what you say and do to expose the motivations behind those words and actions. The truth of Scripture reveals our intentions, going beyond the surface of our lives to the inner realities of our souls.

***diikneomai*: cutting**

To reach through.

2. Read Hebrews 4:13. In light of the explanation we explored above regarding how God’s Word cuts through the petty to expose the profound, why might it be wise to read the Scriptures thoughtfully and soberly and to carefully steward the truths we find there?

3. This idea that God, through His Word, rightly separates our intentions from our actions and lays us bare to be fully known can stir up strong emotions in even the most faithful follower of Christ. What emotions do you experience as you let this truth sink into your thoughts? Fear? Surprise? Excitement? Delight? Something else? Note your response—and the reason why—below.

4. Read Acts 20:32. What two purposes does Luke cite for God’s message of grace?

1. _____
2. _____

God “pierces” our lives not to punish us but rather to seek out ways to build us up. His counsel works not to reject us but to reform and rebuild our lives. His insight positions us not for destruction but for an eternity spent with Him. Like a doctor who searches for an adequate diagnosis in order to find a cure for our disease, God knows who we are and who we’re becoming, and so He longs to show us exactly where we need shoring up.

5. When have you experienced the particular “building up” that the Word of God can supply? Describe the challenge you were facing and how the Scriptures helped you break through.

6. As you survey the landscape of your life today, where do you need God’s power most? What would “being built up” look like for you now?

7. Which of the following promises regarding the Word of God speak most directly to you today given your unanswered questions and your questions about the future?

- “How sweet your words taste to me; they are sweeter than honey. Your commandments give me understanding; no wonder I hate every false way of life. Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path. . . . Your laws are my treasure; they are my heart’s delight.” (Ps. 119:103–5, 111)
- “The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.” (Isa. 55:10–11)
- “I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.” (John 15:1–4)
- “Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn’t think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.” (1 Thess. 2:13)
- “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

- “For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.” (1 Pet. 1:23)

8. What fruit do you believe God wants for the Scriptures to produce in and through your life during the season in which you find yourself? What accomplishments might God intend for you that will be brought about only as you engage with His Word?

Practicing Prayer

At last, let’s pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

In John 17, Jesus prays to His heavenly Father just before facing brutal crucifixion on a Roman cross. He looks heavenward and says:

Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you. For you have given him authority over everyone. He gives eternal life to each one you have given him. And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth. I brought glory to you here on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. Now, Father, bring me into the glory we shared before the world began.

I have revealed you to the ones you gave me from this world. They were always yours. You gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything I have is a gift from you, for I have passed on to them the message you gave me. They accepted it and know that I came from you, and they believe you sent me.

My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you. All who are mine belong to you, and you have given them to me, so they bring me glory. Now I am departing from the world; they are staying in this world, but I am coming to you. Holy Father, you have given me your name; now protect them by the power of your name so that they will be united just as we are. During my time here, I protected them by the power of the name you gave me. I guarded them so that not one was lost, except the one headed for destruction, as the Scriptures foretold.

Now I am coming to you. I told them many things while I was with them in this world so they would be filled with my joy. I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth. (vv. 1-19)

God's Word is truth.

We are made holy by this truth.

We survive the pain of this world by this truth.

We are changed into the image of Jesus by this truth.

It is by this truth alone that we live.

Father, Your truth is power, and I acknowledge that power now by telling You that . . .

As I sit refreshed in my awareness of Your Word's ability to form and reform my life, I am reminded of times along the way when a particular verse of Scripture met me where I was and changed me for the better, such as when . . .

Here and now, I long for Your Word to . . .

Your Word says that whenever I ask for something that is in accordance with Your will, You will answer that request with a resounding yes! Today, I humbly ask that You would . . .

I pray that by Your Spirit I would be directed to . . .

I pray that by Your Spirit I would flee the desires of my sinful nature, such as . . .

I pray for the power to overcome . . .

and for the compassion to . . .

I pray that Your love would flow through me to . . .

I pray that I would keep growing in knowledge and in understanding so that . . .

Father, give me spiritual insight so that I may . . .

Help me to honor You in all I do, remembering that . . .

In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

Practicing What We Learn

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

In Luke 11, Jesus is teaching His disciples spiritual lessons when He says, “Blessed are all who hear the Word of God and put it into practice” (v. 28). How might you respond? How might God have you respond? What is one spiritual principle you have learned from God’s Word that you have neglected to put into practice? By faith, what is one step you can take today to practice what you have learned?

SESSION 7

Suiting Up

Our Prayer to God: “You Are My Protection.”

Preparing for spiritual battle is critical. We don't want to engage with the enemy when we are unprepared.

chapter 8, *Praying Women*

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Ephesians 6:10

Sometimes storms come out of nowhere. We experienced that recently here in Dallas when Barry and I were watching a Dallas Cowboys football game. During a commercial break, we changed the channel to catch the local news only to be informed that a tornado had been sighted in our area. The storm seemed to come out of nowhere and quickly gained strength. A few moments later an F3 tornado touched down just half a mile from our house, devastating homes and schools and knocking the power out for tens of thousands of people. The instructions on the screen were clear: “Go to a safe place! Watch out! Be on guard!” The same is true in the spiritual realm. Because we have an enemy, we've been instructed to stay alert.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

When I think about spiritual warfare, the prevailing emotion I feel is . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

In 1 Peter 5:8, we are given insight regarding how to deal with the forces of evil we encounter in this life. “Stay alert!” we read. “Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.”

Awareness.

Sober-mindedness.

Great care.

We are to stay spiritually on guard in life, knowing that as we grow in faith and in our commitment to Christ, we are more vulnerable to Satan’s attacks. He is looking, as 1 Peter 5:8 attests, for someone to devour—in the Greek, “to swallow up, to drink down, to consume.”

katapino: devour

To swallow up, to drink down, to consume.

While Satan’s power on earth is temporary, it is real. For this reason, we are told in Scripture to “suit up” with spiritual armor to protect ourselves from attack. In Ephesians 6:10–18, the apostle Paul, writing to believers in the church in Ephesus, concludes his letter with this:

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Therefore, put on every piece of God’s armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God’s righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.

This might seem like a great deal of preparation, but every piece of the armor has a purpose. God has given us everything we need to be able to stand strong when we are facing spiritual warfare. The enemy might be powerful, but he is no match for our God, and when we daily put our armor on, we are protected from the devil's fiery darts.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

You may be able to think of times in your life when you felt strong spiritually, but then life kicked in, problems came, and suiting up felt like just one more thing on your to-do list. So you let it all go. The good news is this: it's never too late to start again. The goal for every believer is to continue in strength over months and years and decades. This, Paul said, is the benefit of spiritual armor. With it, we may continue to stand firm—to continue in surefootedness, in strength.

histemi endunamoo: stand firm

To continue in surefootedness and strength.

1. What, exactly, do we need to “stand firm” against? Look up the following verses and write in your own words a brief summary of Satan's activity, both historically and today.

Job 1:9–11

Isaiah 14:12–15

Matthew 4:1–10

Matthew 6:13

Matthew 7:15

Matthew 16:23

John 8:44

John 10:10

2 Corinthians 4:4

2 Corinthians 11:14

Ephesians 6:11

2 Thessalonians 2:9-10

1 Timothy 2:14

1 John 3:8

1 John 5:19

Revelation 12:9

2. Which of Satan's various roles does he most often play in your life? Liar? Deceiver? Accuser? Something else? How has this impacted your life?

3. How are the enemy's efforts most dramatically affecting you today? In what aspect of life do you most often feel "under attack"?

4. Reflect on each piece of spiritual armor. How does each piece impact your life?

- Belt of truth

- Body armor of righteousness

- Shoes of peace

- Shield of faith

- Helmet of salvation

- Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God

5. If you are falling prey to Satan's lies, what might happen if you were to declare truth over your situation and your relationships? If your challenge centers on overcoming chaos that seems to be coming at you from every direction, what might occur if you were to more faithfully shod your feet with peace? What do you envision for your life once you put on each piece of armor?

Practicing Prayer

At last, let's pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

Father, what a gift it is to know that You provide for my needs, not just in the physical realm but in the spiritual dimension as well. Thank You for making a way for me to experience . . .

Thank You for loving me enough to . . .

and for helping me to see with fresh perspective how devoted Satan is to . . .

Help me not to take lightly my role in . . .

As it relates to righteousness, help me to . . .

Regarding peace, may I . . .

And on the topic of faith, would You please . . .

I pray I will never take for granted my salvation but instead will . . .

Regarding my habits associated with reading, memorizing, reciting, and applying Your Word, help me to . . .

In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

The Work That Is God's to Do

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet by the same name tells the story of the rebellious nation Israel and the punishment that surely awaits them for the wrong they’ve done. The people have turned their backs on God, and God, being just, must receive payment for this sin. The “day of the Lord” is coming, the day when judgment will be handed down. Or so everyone thinks. The truth of the matter is that God has a plan, a plan to help.

God’s plan is centered on compassion, on redeeming all that has been lost. Streams will rise in the desert, the prophet proclaims. The exiles will return home. All will be restored to its original state. Light will shine again. The prophet Isaiah is now tasked with explaining both sides of this coin to God’s chosen people—the judgment and the plan. Which is where we pick up the story.

In Isaiah 52, just after the people are rebuked for worshiping false gods and called to fully trust the Lord, we read this: “Get out! Get out and leave your captivity, where everything you touch is unclean. Get out of there and purify yourselves, you who carry home the sacred objects of the LORD. You will not leave in a hurry, running for your lives. For the LORD will go ahead of you; yes, the God of Israel will protect you from behind” (vv. 11–12).

The irony here is that while the Israelites were expected to tend to all the details of their deliverance—traveling to a specific place at a specific time, heralding the message of salvation, keeping watch for enemies as they went—it was the Lord who would take responsibility for protecting them in the end. Yes, they were to be faithful, but that faithfulness was to be placed in God.

In the same way, even as we are faithful to put on the spiritual armor of God each day to protect ourselves from Satan’s attacks, we recognize that it is God who has gone before us and who fights our every battle in the end. We determine to be led by truth. We pursue righteousness at any cost. We seek peace and work to attain it. We uphold the truths of our faith. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We look to God’s Word to govern our lives.

And yet.

And yet it is God who oversees our comings and goings.

It is God who is sovereign in our lives.

It is God’s protection that truly defends us.

It is God’s work that leads to the win.

SESSION 8

All Rise

Our Prayer to God: “You Have Won!”

I’m asking God that you will be able to hold your head up high no matter what. No matter who has tried to diminish you, disrespect you, leave you, those things have a shelf life, a sell-by date. You have a future in heaven that no one can touch. You are a loved child of God.

chapter 10, *Praying Women*

And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!”

Revelation 21:5

It was going to be seventy degrees on Christmas day in Dallas in 2019, but we weren’t in Dallas. We were in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in search of a white Christmas. I’d heard that this was a beautiful spot, but nothing prepared me for the grandeur of the snow-covered Grand Tetons as we circled to land in Jackson Hole. Our son, Christian, had just graduated from college and had been accepted into graduate school, so this trip was a family celebration as well. We spent the first couple of days relaxing and sightseeing, but by day three, Christian was ready to ski. He’s a very accomplished, double black diamond skier, but if you read my book *It’s Okay Not to Be Okay*, you’ll remember that Barry and I are . . . severely challenged on the slopes. I’m the only person I know who fell off the little conveyer belt that takes you to the top of the bunny slope. I had made peace with the fact that my skiing days were probably over, but I still wanted to go to the top of the mountain. I piled in with ninety-nine skiers into the mountaintop gondola that would take us to over ten thousand feet. In just nine minutes we were in another world, pristine sparkling snow and breathtaking scenery. It was noisy as all the skiers piled out of the gondola and headed down the mountain but then . . . silence. I was the only one left on top of the mountain until the next gondola arrived. It was magnificent. Far below, cars like toys moved through the slushy snow on the street, but from where I stood, as I looked out, all I could see was perfect beauty, peaceful, flawless. This Scripture came to mind: “Though your sins are like scarlet,

I will make them as white as snow” (Isa. 1:18). Tears ran down my cheeks and I raised my hands in worship as I thought of all Christ has done to make us white as snow.

It’s easy to get bogged down in the dailiness of life and all its challenges and problems, but I don’t want you to lose sight of the picture from a higher vantage point. Lift your eyes and your heart and remember this: because of Jesus, we win! Not only do we win, but our enemy will be defeated forever. Paul wrote with absolute confidence to the house churches in Rome when he said, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20).

Paul is so certain of the enemy’s ultimate demise, so convinced that in the end God’s victory is sure, that he speaks of Satan’s imminent crushing with an almost flippant tone.

God’s victory, according to Paul’s way of thinking, is a given.

A certainty.

A coming event that cannot be stopped.

Indisputable.

Undeniable.

The absolute, rock-solid truth.

“Live your life in light of this truth!” it’s as if Paul is saying. “Stay the course of faithfulness, because the One to whom you’re faithful has already secured the victory! Don’t give satisfaction to a losing opponent. Choose to keep the main thing the main thing.”

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

If I were to keep in mind the fact that Satan’s ultimate demise is imminent, the biggest benefit I’d reap would be . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

Perhaps the most compelling depiction of Satan's eventual end is found in Revelation 20. Written by John while on the island of Patmos, off the coast of what was then Asia Minor, the book details his prophetic vision regarding the end times.

Then I [John] saw an angel coming down from heaven with the key to the bottomless pit and a heavy chain in his hand. He seized the dragon—that old serpent, who is the devil, Satan—and bound him in chains for a thousand years. The angel threw him into the bottomless pit, which he then shut and locked so Satan could not deceive the nations anymore until the thousand years were finished. Afterward he must be released for a little while.

Then I saw thrones, and the people sitting on them had been given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony about Jesus and for proclaiming the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his statue, nor accepted his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They all came to life again, and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

This is the first resurrection. (The rest of the dead did not come back to life until the thousand years had ended.) Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. For them the second death holds no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him a thousand years.

When the thousand years come to an end, Satan will be let out of his prison. He will go out to deceive the nations—called Gog and Magog—in every corner of the earth. He will gather them together for battle—a mighty army, as numberless as sand along the seashore. And I saw them as they went up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded God's people and the beloved city. But fire from heaven came down on the attacking armies and consumed them.

Then the devil, who had deceived them, was thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, joining the beast and the false prophet. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (vv. 1–10)

Regardless how fierce Satan seems today, in the end, his undoing will be swift and sure. The deceiver will be destroyed, thrust into an eternal state of torment with all who oppose God. The Greek word for torment, *basanizo*, means “to vex, to confuse, to annoy.” The promise of Revelation 20 is this: the day will come when we will no longer be tormented by the accuser; all torment will be directed at him.

***basanizo*: torment**

To vex, to confuse, to annoy.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

1. With so many of our “big questions” unanswered regarding life and death and eternity with God, why do you suppose God chose to reveal Satan’s ultimate undoing to us ahead of time? What do you think God hoped this knowledge would accomplish in our earthly lives?

2. How does the reality that Satan will be forever silenced someday help you with his current taunts and threats today?

One chapter after we learn of Satan’s demise, John gives us a picture of the new reality that will unfold, one devoid of the enemy’s presence, persistence, and power. In Revelation 21, we read:

Then I [John] saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children." (vv. 1–7)

3. John mentioned four absences in our eternal reality: the absence of death, the absence of sorrow, the absence of crying, and the absence of pain. Write down your thoughts regarding the implications of each absence. What burdens do you currently carry that will one day be banished from life?

The absence of death, hint, no need to fear

The absence of sorrow

The absence of crying

The absence of pain

4. Part of the model prayer Jesus prayed in Matthew 6:9–13 involved asking that God's kingdom in heaven would come to invade earth. Verse 10 reads, "May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." When have you caught a glimpse of God's kingdom coming to earth? Did you spot it in the innocent wonder of a child? In the kindness of a stranger? In forgiveness graciously extended from one you'd wronged? In answered prayer? Something else? Spend a few moments scouring your memories, and then note your insights below.

In James 5, we find helpful ways to bridge the two realities of life: the one in which no suffering exists and the painful one we find ourselves in still today. Read the passage below, and then answer the questions that follow.

Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. (vv. 13–16)

5. What does James exhort us to do? Based on James's exhortations, what do you think is the connection between prayer and the kingdom of God invading earth now?

6. Following a key theme of the New Testament, James links the ideas of prayer and being made well. Take a look at the derivation of the word *egeiro* in the sidebar. Then note below the various forms of wellness you desire. What part of your life needs to be *roused from sleep*? What aspect of your physical person needs to be *healed from disease*? What spiritual disciplines would benefit from being *roused from inactivity*?

***egeiro*: well; to be made well**

To collect one's faculties; to waken; to rouse from sleep, from disease, from death; or figuratively, to rouse from obscurity, from inactivity, from ruins, from nonexistence; to awake; to lift; to raise again; to rear up; to take up.

Oh, that we would live as though Satan's defeat is a given, an imminent turn of events, a certainty in our lives and that we would be aware of his losing ways, his schemes that are destined to fail. My prayer is that we would stay plugged in to the power of God through His Holy Spirit, knowing that our victory has already been won.

Practicing Prayer

At last, let's pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

We see in the example of Jesus's resurrection God's faithfulness to raise up His children and to bring life from what was once dead. In Ephesians 1:19–22, we read that the same power that raised Christ is available to us, here and now. To the church in Ephesus, Paul wrote:

I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come. God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church.

Wherever you need God's life-giving power today, God is eager to supply it for you. Go boldly before His throne now, believing that in *His strength*, as Philippians 4:13 asserts, you really can do all things.

Father, while I know it's true that a new reality is unfolding, the burdens of this reality can seem very hard to bear. Today, I'm especially aware of the burdens of . . .

The weight of these concerns leaves me feeling . . .

And yet when I consider the new heaven and new earth You are ushering in, I take heart, believing that . . .

I worship You for Your promise to . . .

and for Your commitment to . . .

and for Your faithfulness to . . .

I eagerly await the ultimate “raising up,” when . . .

Until then, I trust You to raise up these things in my life:

In Jesus’s name I pray, amen.

Building Our House

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

In Proverbs 14, Solomon, known as the wisest man ever to live, presents an interesting word picture. In verse 1, he says, “The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.” The question arises, How might we “build our house”?

Do you think that with each ounce of wisdom displayed a woman builds her house?

Might a word of encouragement spoken build our house?

Would refusing to promote ourselves, deciding to accept one another, choosing to demonstrate love build our house?

Would stepping toward reconciliation build our house?

Would giving and not expecting to receive build our house?

Would resolving to be patient and gentle and teachable and kind build our house?

What if each prayer prayed helped to build our house? Would that alter how you prayed?

Indeed, the faithful prayers of a righteous woman avail much. Your prayers avail so much. When God's daughters go down on their knees, the battle is not over, the battle is just beginning.

BONUS SESSION 1

The Posture of Prayer

God is waiting to bring joy and peace to the confusion of our days.

Sheila Walsh

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously,
and he will give you everything you need.

Matthew 6:33

At its root, prayer is simply communicating with God and experiencing His presence. It can center on worship, in which we acknowledge and express gratitude for the various aspects of God's character. It can provide a means for confessing our wrongdoing to God and asking Him for forgiveness. It can allow for earnest thanksgiving as we recount the many blessings in our lives. It can provide an opportunity for us to lay down our burdens, telling God of the pain and stress we feel. It can be "an intimate sharing between friends," as St. Teresa of Avila once wrote, and also, in the words of Charles Spurgeon, an astounding "spiritual transaction with the Creator of heaven and earth."

Most promisingly, it is, according to Søren Kierkegaard, a powerful way "not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." And truly, who doesn't want this sort of fundamental change, this type of shift in our natural selves? We have tried to be our own gods and failed; surely God would do better in the role.

And yet despite these and a thousand more reasons to pray, too often our biases, formed over the years, confirm that there is no benefit to engaging with God.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

If I were asked to cite one struggle I've had regarding prayer, I'd say that . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

If you've ever lamented the fact that your prayers reach no farther than the ceiling, or that a prayer has gone unanswered for years, or that despite your earnest cries there is no relief to be found, then it's likely you've come to the conclusion that prayer just doesn't "work." And yet Jesus's example shows that prayer is not just a nice addition to life but rather *vital* to one's spiritual success.

In the best-known sermon Jesus ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, He taught His followers what it meant to follow Him. He explained to them who would be blessed—the humble, the merciful, the pure. He explained their primary mission in life—to be salt, to be light, to love well. He explained how the law fit into the free gift of grace. He explained how to control their anger, how to deny their fleshly lusts, how to maintain strong marriages, how to offer forgiveness to those who'd done wrong. He explained how to give love to an enemy, how to give help to one in need, and how to give adequate time to spiritual disciplines, such as fasting and prayer. And then He explained to them how to pray.

When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come soon.
May your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one. (Matt. 6:5–13)

It was as if Jesus were saying to His disciples, “All the other things I’ve encouraged you to do—love well and extend forgiveness quickly and pursue righteousness at any cost—can be done only by doing this one thing. Pray. And after that, pray some more.” Prayer doesn’t change God, it changes us.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

1. Toward the end of Jesus’s teaching on prayer (in verses 9–13), He offered a model prayer that is often called the Lord’s Prayer. What words did Jesus use to begin that prayer? Write the first sentence of Jesus’s prayer below.

2. In the original Greek, the word for God’s holiness, “hallowed,” is *hagiazō*, which means “to purify, to consecrate (set apart), to sanctify.” What do you suppose it means to keep God’s name “pure” or “set apart”? (Several ideas that harken back to the Old Testament are found in Exodus 20:3–7. How might these instructions apply to us today?)

hagiazō: hallowed

To purify, to consecrate (set apart), to sanctify.

3. There are any number of ways that Jesus could have begun His model prayer, and yet He chose this one: “Our Father in heaven. May your name be kept holy.” What does this opening line reveal about the posture we are to maintain in prayer?

4. How might your experience in prayer be different if you were to focus first on God’s purity, His holiness, the fact that He’s set apart?

5. In Luke 22, we find Jesus facing the greatest challenge of His earthly ministry: certain death on a cross. The text says that following the Last Supper, He gathered up His closest friends and walked to the garden of Gethsemane to spend time in prayer. There He told them, “Pray that you will not give in to temptation” (v. 40). Verses 41–42 say that Jesus then “walked away, about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.’” What spiritual understanding do you think enabled Jesus to shift from asking God to “take My *pain* away” to asking Him to “take My *will* away”?

6. During your times of frustration in prayer, would you say that your posture toward God was one of “take my pain away” or one of “take my will away”?

7. What fears, insecurities, or assumptions might make it difficult for you to invite God to diminish your will and ways so that His will and ways can unfold in and through your life?

8. What do the following verses suggest about why it is wisdom to persevere through such difficulty?

Psalm 23:3

Jeremiah 17:9

Romans 12:2

Romans 13:14

Practicing Prayer

At last, let's pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

Heavenly Father, despite so many feeble attempts to come to You in prayer—enthusiastically, authentically, and faithfully—here I am, ready to try again. As much as I am able, I'm letting all other cares fall away as I sit before You now, and as honestly as I can, I tell You that I . . .

Thank You for the example that Jesus offered regarding the wise way to approach You in prayer. I have so many thoughts swirling in my mind . . . the stress of today, the weight of the circumstances I'm facing, the questions I'm searching for answers to . . . and yet I see in Jesus's example the need to first honor Your name. And so, Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. May Your name be kept holy. May Your name . . .

Father, Your Word says that Your name is a strong fortress and that the godly run to You and are safe. How I crave that sense of strength and protection today. Specifically, I yearn for . . .

I long for You to strengthen me in the area of . . .

I ask for You to keep me safe from . . .

In Psalm 23:3, David wrote that You renewed his strength, that You guided him along right paths, and that through his life You brought honor to Your name. Father, even more than wanting relief from the burdens I bear, I want You to accomplish these three things in my life. Please renew my strength so that I may . . .

Please guide me along right paths so that I can avoid . . .

And, Father, please gather up honor for Your name in and through my thoughts and words and actions so that I may . . .

I pray for a permanent shift in my posture toward prayer, from that of seeking approval for my own will and ways to that of seeking Your will and ways to be honored. Help me now to . . .

In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

Shift toward Faith

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

In Matthew 6, Jesus delivers a promise to His disciples—and to us—regarding what will happen in their lives should they choose to prioritize God’s will, God’s ways, God’s honor, God’s fame above their own. In verse 33, He says this: “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he [God] will give you everything you need.”

How would you put words to the “everything” you’re in need of during this particular season of life? What encouragement does this promise hold for you now? What will seeking first the kingdom of God entail for you today?

BONUS SESSION 2

The Priority of Prayer

It takes deliberate and continuous effort to carve out time in our overfull schedules to listen to the voice of God.

Sheila Walsh

Never stop praying.

1 Thessalonians 5:17

In the Old Testament book of Exodus, after the Israelites had made their escape from Egyptian slavery, God led them on a desert trek that would last a full forty years. The Israelites grumbled over this turn of events, thinking it would have been better for God to have let them die in Egypt instead of in this hot, dusty place. But God had different plans in mind, plans that would help the Israelites learn to trust Him for their needs instead of looking to their own will and ways.

“You have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death!” they cried, to which God said to the people’s leader, Moses, “Look, I’m going to rain down food from heaven for you. Each day the people can go out and pick up as much food as they need for that day. I will test them in this to see whether or not they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they will gather food, and when they prepare it, there will be twice as much as usual. . . . I have heard the Israelites’ complaints. Now tell them, ‘In the evening you will have meat to eat, and in the morning you will have all the bread you want. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God’” (16:3–5, 12).

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His followers not to worry about everyday needs; in the same way that God provided each day’s nourishment for the Israelites, He would provide for their needs as well. Jesus said:

Isn’t life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren’t you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?

And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?

So don’t worry about these things, saying, “What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?” These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. (Matt. 6:25–33)

“Look to me,” God was saying to the Israelites.

“Look to the Father,” Jesus would later say.

Trust Him.

Rely on Him.

Trust the provision that He alone can bring.

“This same God who takes care of me,” the apostle Paul declared in Philippians 4:19, “will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.”

Come to Him.

Pray to Him.

Ask Him for what you need.

“Pray without ceasing,” we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (ESV), which is a picture not of occasionally throwing up a quick prayer to God but rather of an ongoing, unabated, unrushed communion with Him, a never-ending dialogue, an unbroken connection, a settling in over the long haul with the One who knows us best.

adialeiptos: **without ceasing**

Uninterruptedly; without omission.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

If I were to rate how consistently I return to God—for strength, for wisdom, for fresh ideas, for relational insights, for inspiration—I’d say I . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

This habit of looking to God for provision is something the Bible calls “remaining” or “abiding,” and it’s an idea that is at the heart of prayer.

Consider Jesus’s words as recorded in John 15:1–8.

I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

meno: remain

To stay in a given place, state, relation, or expectancy; to abide; to continue; to dwell; to endure; to be present; to stand; to tarry for; literally, to “abide in Christ’s love.”

To remain in Christ is not to merely initiate a conversation with God occasionally but rather to keep the lines of communication open with God all the time such that we lean in to hear from Him moment to moment, such that we readily (and eagerly) act on the promptings we receive, such that we live life plugged in to the power that He alone can provide.

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

1. The fact that Jesus exhorts believers to “remain in Him” implies that it is possible to remain in things *other* than Christ. Some people choose to remain in anxiety or stress. Others choose to remain in habits that clearly aren't serving them well. Some choose to remain in spiritual unbelief. Examine your life today.. What are you choosing to remain in these days?

2. Based on how you answered the previous question, what do you think the consequences would be of remaining in that particular place forever? On the contrary, what gains could you make if you began remaining in Christ instead? Write down your thoughts.

3. Removing all guesswork from the equation, Jesus cites specific benefits that await those who choose to remain in Him. In the passage above, underline or highlight three benefits He mentions. Why do you suppose God holds back these benefits only for those who remain in His Son?

4. Look up the following verses and write down the type of communication with God that you find.

Psalm 18:6

Jeremiah 33:3

Luke 6:27–28

Philippians 4:6

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

James 5:16

1 John 1:9

5. As you consider the various types of prayer noted above, which one do you need most today and why? Confession? Intercession? A few unhurried moments spent expressing your heartfelt gratitude to God? Something else? Write down your thoughts before moving into a time of prayer.

Practicing Prayer

At last, let's pray. Find a spot where you can sit quietly before the Lord. Then complete the prompts below by writing your thoughts, speaking them aloud, or responding silently in your heart.

Father, it is always good to come before Your throne of grace, for it is there that mercy and help are found. I thank You today for Your mercy, which . . .

and for Your help, which . . .

I thank You also for being . . .

I know I need to pray a prayer of . . .

because I . . .

I recognize that only You can . . .

And so I look to You now to . . .

And would You please help me, while I wait for Your answer, to become more . . .

I pray for the persistence to keep returning to You with my needs, my questions, my requests, believing that You . . .

I ask You, Father, that by Your Spirit You would prompt in me faithfulness to . . .

I pray that over time I will become a more faith-filled praying woman, that I will become known as a powerful praying woman, that the things that most characterize my life will be . . .

In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

Counting on God

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make in light of it, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

In the worship song “I’m Counting on God,” the writer asserts that when we count on God instead of counting on ourselves, our ideas, our will, our ways, our plans, we experience “joy unspeakable that won’t go away / and just enough strength to live for today.”

Unspeakable joy today as we receive today’s strength.

Unspeakable joy tomorrow as we receive tomorrow’s strength.

Unspeakable joy the following day as we receive that day’s strength.

Day by day, looking to God, *counting on* God, we receive the provision we need in life.

Is it possible that unspeakable joy is ours for the taking regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in? In what ways does such joy glorify God? And how might it benefit you?

Prayer is not something we accidently fall into. Prayer is a focused commitment to seek God in all we do, in who we are, with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind. Prayer is oxygen to the believer's soul.

And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.

Genesis 15:6

Write your own name into this text:

And _____ believed the Lord, and the Lord counted her as righteous because of her faith.

