
Brian Chesemore
SESSION 1 | WHAT IS PRAYER?

Our Recommended Text

Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God by Timothy Keller (Dutton)

Class Overview

Week One: What Is Prayer? | Chapters 3-5
Week Two: Learning Prayer | Chapters 6-9
Week Three: Deepening Prayer | Chapters 10-11
Week Four: Doing Prayer | Chapters 12-15

Additional Recommended Reading

- *Take Words with You* by Tim Kerr
- *Praying the Lord's Prayer* by J.I. Packer (Crossway)
- *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by D.A. Carson (Inter Varsity Press)
- *The Valley of Vision* (Banner of Truth)
- *The Message of Prayer* by Timothy Chester (Inter Varsity Press)
- *Heart Aflame: Daily Readings from Calvin on the Psalms* (P&R)

I. What Is Prayer?

“What is prayer? Are the innumerable forms of prayer in the world all at heart the same? And if not, how do we define and discern real prayer?”

“There seems to be a human instinct for prayer.” ¹

Keller describes the two ways the world understands prayer:

A. Mystical Prayer

“Mystical religion...sees silent, tranquil, wordless contemplation as the highest form of prayer. When we achieve it, we no longer talk to God—we are part of God.” Mystical prayer, “emphasizes God as more immanent than transcendent. He is within us and within all things. The main way, then to connect to God is to go down into yourself and sense your continuity with the Divine.” ²

¹ Keller, Timothy. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014). Pg. 35-36.

² Ibid, pg. 39.

B. Prophetic Prayer

“Prophetic prayer by contrast emphasizes that God is outside us, transcendent above us, holy, glorious, and ‘Other.’”³

“The aim of prophetic prayer is not absorption into God but nearness to God—the nearness of child to parent or friend to friend....”⁴

II. A Conversation with God

A. A Response

“The knowledge of God for instinctive prayer comes intuitively and generally through **nature** (Ro. 1.20). What Christians know about God comes with verbal specificity through the words of the **Scripture** and its main message—the gospel. In the Bible, God’s living Word, we can hear God speaking to us and we respond in prayer, though we should not call this simply a ‘response.’ Through the Word and Spirit prayer becomes answering God—a full conversation.” (Emphases mine)

B. Informed

i. God’s word reveals his Trinitarian Nature

- Our Heavenly Father: the source of our redemption
- Our Mediator and Savior Jesus Christ: the means of our redemption

“We always have an audience because of what Jesus Christ has done. His death on the cross reconciled us to God (Eph. 2.16) and made him our Father.”⁵

- The Spirit of Adoption: the one who applies redemption

“The moment we are born again by the Spirit through faith in Christ (Jn 1.12-13; 3.5), that Spirit shows us that we are not simply God’s subjects but also his children, and we can converse with him as our Father (Gal. 4.5-6)”⁶

- God’s word teaches an experience of the triune God: prayer to the Father, through the mediating work of the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Through him [Christ] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” (Eph. 2.18)

ii. God’s word reveals the gospel as the basis of prayer

³ Ibid, 39

⁴ Keller, Timothy. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014). Pg. 40.

⁵ Keller. *Prayer*, 77.

⁶ Ibid, 45.

“The basis of prayer is the gospel...The access to God through the Son that we experience in prayer is a snapshot of the gospel. And so the solution to prayerlessness is the gospel...sinners do not want to come before a holy God—we shrink from the light. But in Christ we have been declared righteous. We need not shrink back but can approach God boldly.”⁷

iii. God’s word shape the language of prayer

“It is essential to the practice of prayer to recognize what Peterson calls the ‘overwhelming *previousness* of God’s speech to our prayers.’ This theological principle has practical consequences. It means that our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Scripture. We should ‘plunge ourselves into the sea’ of God’s language, the Bible. We should listen, study, think, reflect, and ponder the Scriptures until there is an answering response in our hearts and minds...It may be one of shame or of joy or of confusion or of appeal—but that response to God’s speech is then truly prayer and should be given to God.”⁸

C. Empowered

i. The Holy Spirit enlivens us through the Word.

“The power of our prayers, then, lies not primarily in our effort and striving, or in any technique, but rather in our knowledge of God.”⁹

ii. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to mature our prayers.

“Just as God’s Word must reform our theology, our ethics, and our practices, so also must it reform our praying.”¹⁰

Conclusion: Prayer is a response to the knowledge of God. Therefore, prayer is profoundly strengthened by an increased Bible intake and accurate knowledge of God.

III. An Encounter With God

A. An Intelligent Experience of Communion

“It is necessary for us to recognize that there is an intelligent mysticism in the life of faith...of living union and communion with the exalted and ever-present Redeemer...He communes with his people and his people commune with him in conscious reciprocal love.”¹¹

⁷ Chester, Timothy. *The Message of Prayer*. From *The Bible Speaks Today Series*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2003). Pg. 58.

⁸ Keller, *Prayer*, 55.

⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

¹⁰ Carson, D.A. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books and Inter-Varsity Press: Nottingham, United Kingdom, 1999). Pg. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 16.

“We are not called to choose between a Christian life based on truth and doctrine or a life filled with spiritual power and experience. I was not being called to leave behind my theology and launch out to look for “something more,” for experience. Rather, I was meant to ask the Holy Spirit to help me experience my theology.”¹²

“Prayer turns theology into experience. Through it we sense his presence and receive his joy, his love, his peace and confidence, and thereby we are changed in attitude, behavior, and character.”¹³

B. The Testimony of the Scriptures

- “I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore, *my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure...in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*” (Ps. 16.8-9, 11)
- “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.” James 4.8; Phil. 3.10; Ro. 8.15.

IV. Where Should I Begin?

A. Pray for a renewed delight in prayer

“Where is our delight in praying? Where is our sense that we are meeting with the living God, that we are doing business with God, that we are interceding with genuine unction before the throne of grace?

When was the last time we came away from a period of intercession feeling that, like Jacob or Moses, we had prevailed with God? How much of our praying is largely formulaic, liberally larded with clichés that remind us, uncomfortably, of the hypocrites Jesus excoriated? I do not write these things to manipulate you or to be engendering guilty feelings. But what shall we *do*? Have not many of us tried at one point or another to improve our praying, and floundered so badly that we are more discouraged than we ever were? Do you not sense, with me, the severity of the problem? Granted that most of us know some individuals who are remarkable prayer warriors, is it not nevertheless true that by and large we are better at organizing than agonizing? Better at administering than interceding? Better at fellowship than fasting? Better at entertainment than worship? Better at theological articulation than spiritual adoration? Better—God help us!—at preaching than at praying... Shall we not agree with J.I. Packer when he writes, ‘I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we ever face.’ Can we profitably meet the other challenges that confront the Western church if prayer is ignored as much as it has been.”¹⁴

¹² Keller, Timothy. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014). 17.

¹³ *Ibid*, Pg. 80.

¹⁴ Carson, D.A. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books and Inter-Varsity Press: Nottingham, United Kingdom, 1999). Pg. 17.

B. Develop a system for praying.

- Utilize *Take Words with You* by Tim Kerr
- The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-15. Pray it daily.
- Pray through a psalm per day or few psalms each week.

“I know of no faster or better way to enrich your prayer life than to pray God's word in worship. I find this especially true when praying through one of the psalms. Praying as most of us tend to pray, that is, by routinely saying the same old things about the same old things, will freeze the heart of prayer. But to pray through a passage of Scripture means to take living words that have been inspired in the very heart and mind of God and flow them through your heart and mind back to God. And to do this from the Book of Psalms is to use the one book of the Bible inspired by God for the express purpose of being returned to God verbally (the book of Psalms was Israel's God-given songbook.)

Jesus prayed the psalms (Matt. 27:46), and so did the Christians in the Book of Acts (4:24-26). Why not you? You will not only see reminders to pray for the concerns you want to pray about daily (such as family, your future, your work, etc) springing out of every psalm, you will also find yourself prompted by the text to pray about matters you'd never think about otherwise. Best of all, by using the words of Scripture as your own you will pray in fresh new ways every time, even when praying about the 'same old things.'

Although the benefits of praying through a passage of Scripture are many, one of the most valuable is the sense of worship and intimacy with God that accompanies it. After praying through Scripture for the first time, many have said to me, “It's like a real conversation with a real person.” And that is what prayer should be.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Whitney, Donald. From Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship; edited by Ryken, Thomas, and Duncan. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2003). Pg. 80.
