

## **EXPLORING CHRISTIAN LIFE PRAYER**

### **BEFORE THE TALK**

*If you have arranged for someone to begin this session by sharing his or her testimony, introduce that person at this point. Ideally, their testimony should last no more than 3 minutes.*

*Give a brief introduction – the wording below is intended only as a general guide.*

In this third session, we're going to look at another essential ingredient in the Christian life: prayer.

### **THE TALK**

*Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to explain why and how Christians pray.*

Most people see prayer as a last resort in a crisis. A crisis comes – be it an exam you are underprepared for, or a traffic jam when you're late for a meeting – and you think to yourself, “well, there's nothing else I can do, I'd better pray.” It's a 999 or 911 call; an emergency service. When nothing else will work, we pray.

Others see prayer as a formula. Perhaps you've been brought up to say your prayers, to say, “God bless Mummy, God bless Daddy and help me to be good” just before you went to bed.

Then there are the sportsmen who can't run onto a field without crossing themselves and saying a little prayer. It becomes a sort of superstition.

Another image of prayer is like this. Picture a deserted little town in a Clint Eastwood western. A monk is standing in front of a dusty church. He is wearing a coarse brown robe with a sort of rope around his waist. His hands are clasped prayerfully together and he looks meek, fragile and undernourished. In front of him is Clint on horseback, with his poncho and his tilted hat. The monk asks, “Let me help you get the bad guys!” Clint replies, “No, it's dangerous and you can't fight.” “But I want to help,” says the monk, to which Clint contemptuously replies, “Well, I guess you could always pray,” as he gallops away to where the action is.

That's certainly many people's view of prayer – it's ineffectual. It's what delicate people do while those who get the job done are out getting the job done.

If that's how you think of prayer, then I have to tell you that the Bible will confront you head-on, because you have failed to understand who Christians pray to.

Please turn to Acts chapter 4, and we will read verses 23–31.

*Read aloud Acts 4:23–31.*

At this point, the disciples' situation could not get much worse. Their leader has been crucified and their two main spokesmen have just been interrogated by the highest religious authorities, who are determined to shut them up. In the face of this fierce opposition, they pray together. And look at who they pray to in verse 24: the "Sovereign Lord ... [who] made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them."

It's as if they're saying, "Lord, you are Sovereign, you made the universe, our world and all the people who live in it, and you're in control of everything, even those people who are threatening us."

Look again at verses 27–28.

*Read aloud Acts 4:27–28.*

You see, that's who Christians pray to: a God who is unimaginably powerful. However hostile people are towards him, plotting against this "Sovereign Lord" is a complete waste of time. So even though Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel all conspired to have Jesus killed, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Their evil plans only succeed in fulfilling what God had already decided should happen. Now, at the time, it must have seemed very different. On the day of the crucifixion, the disciples must have thought that nothing could be worse. But a few months later, they can see that God has always been in control.

That's not to say that God's enemies are puppets who have no choice but to disobey God. The Bible makes it clear that everyone has the choice to obey or to disobey. But the disciples' prayer here gives us a glimpse of just how powerful God is: "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." You have to be unimaginably powerful to have your enemies do your bidding, even as they seek to destroy you. But that is precisely the kind of God who hears Jesus' followers when they pray.

The disciples – having in mind who God is – then ask for God's help. They pray in verse 29: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." And God responds to their prayer in a very visible way, as you can see in verse 31: "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." By speaking the word of God boldly, they are doing exactly what the authorities have forbidden them to do. You wouldn't do that unless you believed that God was Sovereign.

So when you pray it is important to remember who you pray to: the Sovereign Lord, who is in complete control of everything that will happen to you. And of course, if God were not in control, then there would be no point in praying. But, if he is in control, then I can pray about anything.

Talk to your leaders, and they will tell you about the ways God has answered prayer in their lives and in the lives of people they know.

*At this point, you might want to ask one of the group leaders to give a testimony illustrating how God has answered prayer in his or her life.*

But that's not all. As well as being "Sovereign Lord," God is also – if you're a Christian – *your Father*.

Please turn to Matthew chapter 6, and we'll read verses 5 and 6.

*Read aloud Matthew 6:5–6.*

It is interesting to ask why the hypocrites in verse 5 stand on the street corners. It's because double the number of people will see them. If you are on the corner people from both streets will see you. "But," Jesus says in 6, "when *you* pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father."

And look at verse 9.

*Read aloud Matthew 6:9.*

Perhaps the most striking thing here is that Jesus tells his followers to refer to God as "Father." In fact, the word Jesus uses for "Father" is closer to our word "Daddy." There is tremendous intimacy here.

Let me try and illustrate just what a privilege it is to be able to call the Sovereign Lord of the universe "Father." You may remember the picture of President Kennedy working at his desk while his son, John, plays beneath it. Now I think it is safe to say that no other little boy in the world could have got anywhere near that desk, but John could walk straight in and play. Why? Because of his relationship with the President. He would have been able to say to anybody who questioned his presence, "He may be your President, but he's my Daddy." He had a level of access and intimacy that would be impossible for anyone else. It was no small thing for John to be able to play under his father's desk, and it is no small thing for a Christian to call God "Father."

It means that Christians can speak to God as they might speak to a loving earthly father: to thank him, ask him for support or forgiveness, confide in him. Of course, the intimacy Christians have with God is because of the cross. If I try praying to God with my sin still in the way, then my prayers will "bounce off the ceiling," as Isaiah chapter 59, verse 2 says: "your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."

However, because Christ dealt with sin at the cross, Christians are able to talk freely with God. In fact, you may hear Christians end their prayers “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” It’s a way of acknowledging that Jesus is the one who has given them access to God.

And, as Christians pray, they develop this relationship with God. Like any relationship, it depends on being yourself – being honest, being natural – and communicating regularly. Psalm 62, verse 8 says this: “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”

Prayer teaches us to be increasingly dependent on God for all our needs. Now, as you know, dependence on a human being can be a bad thing. But unlike an earthly father, God always has the power to do what is best for those who love him. Nothing is beyond his control or outside his concern. Look with me at what Philippians chapter 4, verse 6 says.

*Read aloud Philippians 4:6.*

Of course, God doesn’t *always* answer prayer in the way we want or expect. We pour out our hearts, but God may not respond in the way we’d like. At moments like this, we have to trust that God is in control, that he has a plan for every single one of us, that he is wiser, more loving and more knowledgeable than we are, and that the decisions he makes are trustworthy. There will be difficult situations that we won’t understand until we’re with God in heaven.

So when you pray it is important to remember who you pray to. You pray to your Father, the Sovereign Lord who is in complete control of everything that will happen to you. Prayer is not ineffectual. And it’s not to be treated only as a last resort in a crisis, or as a superstitious formula.

Spike Milligan was once asked, “Do you ever pray?” and he said, “Yes, I do pray desperately all the time, but I’ve no idea *who* I’m praying to.” For Christians, that’s no longer the case.

## **AT THE END OF THE TALK**

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

➤ *Display the following questions and read them aloud.*

- Do *you* ever pray?
- God is “the Sovereign Lord, who is in complete control of everything that may happen to you.” How might this affect your life?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called GROUP DISCUSSION.*