

Drawing Near II

...spiritual renewal through the psalms ©2014 River Oaks Community Church David P. Beaty

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introduction



God does a remarkable thing when He regenerates a human being. The Bible says we were "dead in our trespasses" when God "made us alive" (Ephesians 2:5). When God does this for us, He actually makes us members of His spiritual kingdom. He transfers us from the "domain of darkness" into "the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). God even comes to dwell within us, so that He can say, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Moreover, the apostle Paul wrote that those of us who know Jesus have been blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:3). Suffice it to say that our lives should be different when these things happen!

Our lives usually are different after coming to faith in Jesus. But over time, many Christians tend toward spiritual complacency. Despite having God's forgiveness and fellowship, we often live below the privileges of His presence. We may find it a struggle to pray and to trust God. We may find that our love for pleasure, wealth, and popularity seems stronger than our love for Christ. In this world in which we live, there is much that works against zealous devotion to Jesus Christ. Spiritual apathy seems to be the default human condition.

Because of this strong human tendency, Christians often need the work of God's Spirit to bring renewal, or revival. This should not surprise us—because God's people throughout history have needed His reviving work. The Old Testament is filled with accounts of the people of Israel turning away from God and being brought back by His mercy. God's words to King Solomon demonstrate His willingness—even His eagerness—to restore His wandering people to Himself: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are in the English Standard Version.

face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

The New Testament Book of Acts gives us a picture of the church alive with the Spirit's work. In this record of the early church, we see united prayer, care for one another, empowered evangelism, repentance, and holiness. God has provided us with this record of early church life in order to show us what life can be like when His Spirit is powerfully at work in His church.

God is sovereign in the ways and times He pours out His Spirit upon His people. But He allows—even invites—us to seek the outpouring of His Spirit upon our lives and churches. In both the Old Testament promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and the New Testament pattern of Acts, we see that God works in response to the prayers of His people. In the simplest terms, God's willingness to renew and revive His people is found in James 4:8: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

This study of selected psalms is intended to help us draw near to God and to experience His renewing work individually, in our families, and in our church. The Psalms are rich in invitations to seek the Lord—to worship and learn from Him, even in times of great trial and suffering. The Psalms teach us to draw near to God and to learn to love Him more. As we continue our study of the Psalms, may the Holy Spirit create in each of us a greater desire to seek, know, and love the Lord. May we experience His holiness and joy to such a degree that it overflows into our families, our church, and our world!

In His great love,

David Beaty

Pastor, River Oaks Community Church



understanding and interpreting the psalms

The Book of Psalms is a special gift from God to us. The Psalms teach us, encourage us, guide us, and comfort us. They help us to know God better and love him more.

One reason the Psalms move us so deeply is that they reveal God's presence in the midst of our suffering. Many of the psalms are "laments"—honest accounts of the hardships of the writer. Yet almost all of the psalms contain a note of praise to God. The abundance of praise has made the Psalms a hymn book for God's people. In fact, the Hebrew title of the book is "Tehillim," which means "praises." A key Hebrew term in the Psalms is "mizmor," which means "to sing with stringed instruments." This word is translated as "psalmos" in Greek, giving rise to our English title, "Psalms."

An understanding of the Psalms is vital to our understanding of the Bible, for the Psalms help to tie Scripture together as a unified whole. The Psalms look back to God's work in creation (Psalms 8 and 104). They recall God's power in delivering the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (Psalm 77). They warn us not to emulate the disobedience of the Israelites as they journeyed toward the Promised Land (Psalm 95). The Psalms also look ahead, and they contain many references to the coming Messiah. (Psalms 22, 69, and 110). New Testament writers quote from the Psalms more than any other Old Testament book. The Book of Hebrews reveals Jesus speaking in the Book of Psalms (Hebrews 2:12, 10:5-7). In a post-resurrection conversation with his disciples, Jesus reminded them "that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

Fourteen of the psalms have historical notes in their headings, and these notes give specific detail regarding the time or circumstances of the psalm's composition. For example, the heading of Psalm 3 reads: "A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son." These headings should be considered part of the Scripture itself. Dr. Bruce Waltke, in his lectures on the Psalms, notes that there is no manuscript of the Hebrew Bible that does not contain these superscriptions, or headings. He explains that they are as much a part of the Bible as any other part of the Bible. When the Holy Spirit has provided us with information in the heading of a psalm, we can be sure He wants it to aid us in our understanding of that psalm.

The content of a psalm often helps us understand the circumstances surrounding its composition. Sometimes it is clear from the content that the writer of a particular psalm is going through hardships (e.g., "I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart" [Psalm 38:8].) Sometimes the writer is celebrating God's deliverance (e.g., "He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog" [Psalm 40:2].) Many psalms are prayers (e.g., "Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me" [Psalm 86:1].)

Our understanding of a psalm may also be helped by knowing who wrote it. King David is listed as the composer in the headings of 75 of the 150 psalms. But there are other authors as well. They include:

- Asaph (a leading singer and musician during the time of David)
 Psalm 50 and Psalms 73-83.
 - The sons of Korah Psalms 42-49, 84-85.
 - Solomon Psalms 72 and 127.
 - Ethan the Ezrahite Psalm 89.
 - Moses Psalm 90.

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² Bruce K. Waltke, *Book of Psalms*, lecture 3 (Grand Rapids: Institute of Theological Studies, Division of Outreach, Inc., 1972).

There are several Hebrew terms found in the headings of psalms that can help us know why the psalms were written. These terms include:

- mizmor This word occurs 57 times and probably indicates that the psalm was to be sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments.
- shir A common word for "song," which sometimes occurs with mizmor.
- maskil Found in the heading of seventeen psalms. This word may mean that the psalm has a teaching purpose.
- tehillah This word means a song of praise. It is found in the heading of only one psalm (145), but is the term given to the whole Book of Psalms.
- shiggayon Found only in the heading of Psalm 7, this word may mean "wail," indicating a psalm of mourning.³

Though not found in the headings of psalms, the word "selah" is sometimes found in the body of a psalm. Selah comes from a Hebrew word that means "to lift up." Therefore, it probably carries the idea of saying something emphatically, like "hallelujah," "lift it up," or "say it out loud."⁴

³ Ernest C. Lucas, Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms & Wisdom Literature (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 23-24.
⁴ Waltke, lecture 2.

spiritual disciplines

As mentioned in the introduction, the Book of Psalms helps us to know God better and love Him more. When we look at the nearness to God that is often expressed by the psalmist, we are encouraged that such an intimate and personal relationship can exist between our Lord and ourselves. But if you are like me, the issue is typically not the lack of desire to draw near, it is more a question of *how* to draw near and consistently remain in His presence.

In Drawing Near II, we will explore the practices and spiritual exercises that can enable us to experience a more personal and dynamic relationship with God. Found at the end of each chapter, and designated by a section entitled "Spiritual Disciplines," we will build upon a theme verse from each of the psalms, and introduce to you a specific discipline to explore for that particular week. Some of these may be familiar to you, while others will be new. Our hope is that you and your small group will discuss the discipline, review the recommendations, and then incorporate them into your daily walk. You are also encouraged to hold one another accountable throughout the week and, when you come together the following week, spend some time discussing how it went.

The key to incorporating these disciplines into your spiritual journey—in ways that truly transform and renew—is to select the practices that speak to your personality, as well as those that are challenging to you. In other words, if being still or at rest is not something you do very well, then practicing solitude might be exactly what draws you nearer. Through these next ten weeks, you and your group will have the opportunity to focus on a wide variety of disciplines. I would encourage you to commit yourself to these exercises and prayerfully consider how God might use them to keep you near long after this study concludes.

Finally, as with all aspects of worship, we come to God with a grateful heart for His grace. We are blessed to draw near to Him as we practice spiritual disciplines not out of obligation, but with a genuine desire to encounter Him in ways that we had previously not considered possible. May we all be renewed by drawing near and, in the words of John Donne, the sixteenth-century poet and cleric, may we find new ways for which the Spirit of God comes "into thee."

God has diverse ways into diverse men. Into some he comes at noon, in the sunshine of prosperity; to some in the dark and heavy clouds of adversity. Some he affects with the music of the church; some, with particular collect or prayer; some, with some passage of a sermon, which takes no hold of him that stands next to him. Watch the way of the Spirit of God into thee. – John Donne ⁵

In Him,

David Holcomb Minister of Discipleship

Sa in Hollands

⁵ Steven Klipowicz, "Discerning Your Spiritual Gifts" (lecture, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, July 17, 2014).

psalm 19 God's revelation and renewal

psalm 19: God's revelation and renewal

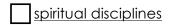
Like many of the psalms, Psalm 19 was written by King David "for the director of music." This beautiful poetic composition has provided the content for a number of hymns since that time. C. S. Lewis called Psalm 19 "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the
Psalm 19 can be easily divided into three sections. Verses 1-6 speak of God's revelation in creation. Verses 7-11 speak of God's revelation in His Word. Verses 12-14 conclude the psalm with prayers for forgiveness, protection from presumptuous sin, and renewed consecration to the
 Lord. understanding the psalm Notice carefully the language of verses 1-6. What is creation said to be doing?

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1958), 63, quoted in James M. Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 161.

	3. What is the responsible and the message of	
Note verses 7 and 8.	In the table below, list e	each term used for
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5.	Read verses 12-14 again. What effect has God's revelation had upon the psalmist?
6.	applying the psalm to your life Based on what you have learned from this psalm, how might you talk to an atheist about the existence of God?
7.	Why do you think so many people say they believe in God, yet live as if He did not exist?

How can the psalm inform the way you pray for such people?
If possible, be prepared to share with your small group a time when God's Word was better than "fine gold" and "sweeter also than
honey" to you? Describe that experience here.



Scripture Meditation:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Psalm $19:14^7$

Meditation, particularly that of meditating on Scripture, is deeply rooted in the Christian faith and in God's people. Psalm 1:2 says, "Blessed is the man who meditates on God's law [His instruction through His Word] day and night." Meditation is also more than memorization or general reading of the Bible. It is intentional. It is aggressive. In fact, the Hebrew word for meditate, *hagah*, implies the imagery of a predator gnawing on the bones of its prey. To meditate on God's Word is to allow the words to speak directly to your heart... to slow down and comprehend its meaning.

Recommended Application: Select a short passage of Scripture, any Scripture at all, to meditate on this week. The passage should be brief—most suggest between three to six verses. Spend 10-15 minutes each day, twice daily if possible, and meditate on this passage. Read it three times through. Then read it aloud. Attempt to read it from multiple translations, if available. First, consider what is literally being said. Next, think about what God's purpose is for providing us with this particular Word. Finally, consider what the implications should be in your walk by discovering this truth. Memorization will come by meditating on this passage each day for a week, but don't focus on that. Rather, consider that you are hiding these words in your heart by "gnawing" on them in this way. One last suggestion is to share frequently what you are discovering during this time of meditation.

⁷ Although Scripture references for this study are in the English Standard Version, feel free to meditate on or memorize verses in another version if you prefer.

2 psalm 51 repentance and renewal	-

psalm 51: repentance and renewal

background The heading of Psalm 51 connects the psalm to events recorded in 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12. There, we learn that King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, a loyal soldier in David's army. Bathsheba became pregnant as a result of David's sin; consequently, David arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle. After Uriah's death, David took Bathsheba as his own wife.
But David's sins of adultery and murder were not hidden from God. The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David about his sins. Psalm 51 is David's confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness. The psalm is one of the most thorough prayers of repentance in the Bible.
Read 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12 in preparation for this study.
 understanding the psalm In verses 1 and 2, David uses three different words to describe his sin. The first is "transgressions." From the Hebrew word "pesha," this refers to crossing a forbidden boundary in rebellion. The second word is "iniquity." From the Hebrew word "awon," this means perversion. The third word he uses is "sin," from the Hebrew word

"challah." This means missing the mark or falling short. 8 Why does David use three different words to describe his sin?

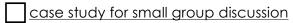
⁸ James M. Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 426.

2.	In verse 4, David says to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned" In light of what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah, why does he say this?
3.	On what basis does David ask for God's forgiveness? (Is it his track record as king, his service to God, or something else?)
	Why is this significant?

4.	In verse 7, David asks God to "purge me with hyssop." Hyssop was a
	small brush-like plant often found in crevices of stone walls. In the
	Old Testament, hyssop was used for the sprinkling of an animal's
	blood to provide atonement for God's people (Exodus 12:22, 24:7-8;
	Leviticus 14:4; Numbers 19:18). Read Hebrews 9:19-26, which
	speaks of Moses using wool and hyssop to sprinkle the "blood of the
	covenant." With this background, explain how David's words in
	verse 7 are ultimately fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

5. What is it that God seeks in those who come to him for cleansing? (Is it sacrifice, a vow to do better, or something else?)

6.	verse 5 is a strong statement about what theologians call "original sin." This means that human beings are sinners by nature, not because they commit specific sins. The doctrine of original sin is explained more fully by the apostle Paul in Romans 3:9-18 and 5:12-14. How does an understanding of original sin affect our understanding of the gospel?
7.	How does Psalm 51 address any of your own tendencies toward self-righteousness?
8.	How can the teaching of this psalm help you get beyond guilt over some past sin?



You have a friend who grew up in a legalistic church. She is convinced that God will award salvation based on adherence to the Ten Commandments, and she maintains that she has always obeyed them. How would you explain the gospel to her?

Breath Prayer – Jesus Prayer:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Psalm 51:1

The call to pray without ceasing is a call to remain in God's presence at all times. "Breath prayers" are disciplines that enable us to focus on this call more consistently. Using a short, single-sentence prayer, consider praying your breath prayer throughout the day. Find moments to concentrate on who God is and what He has done. Many will recommend an exercise of breathing out this prayer in an attempt to slow your pace and to give serious thought to the moment. One of the more common breath prayers is taken from the parable in Luke 18:13, where the tax collector stood at a distance, looked to heaven and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It is this similar plea from David in Psalm 51. This common breath prayer is referred to as the Jesus Prayer, and is a reminder of our inadequacy before God and our dependency upon God:

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Whichever prayer you choose to regularly pray, the desire is to be like that expressed by seventeenth-century writer, Brother Lawrence: "Think often on God, by day, by night, in your business and even in your diversions. He is always near you and with you; leave him not alone."



⁹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 204.

3 psalm 139 comfort in our all-knowing God

psalm 139: comfort in our all-knowing God

background Psalm 139 is rich in its presentation of the attributes of God. The psalm teaches God's omniscience (He is all-knowing), omnipotence (He is all-powerful), and omnipresence (He is present everywhere).
understanding the psalm 1. Where in Psalm 139 do you see each of these attributes revealed?
God's omniscience:
God's omnipresence:
God's omnipotence:

2.	See verses 13-16. What do these verses teach you about God's relationship to the unborn child?
	What do they teach about the uniqueness of an unborn child?
3.	Verses 19-22 are probably the most difficult in the psalm to understand. They raise the question, "Does God really want us to hate the wicked?" Some believe this was King David's way of saying he wanted nothing to do with evil people. Some note verses 23-24 as his prayer for God to correct his attitude. How do you think we should understand these verses? (See Matthew 5:43-48 for Jesus' teaching on our attitude toward
	our enemies.)

4.	applying the psalm to your life Do you find the truth that God knows everything about you to be troubling or comforting?
	Why?
5.	How should our understanding of God's omniscience and omnipresence affect the way we live?

6.	How might verses 11-12 be a help to those who experience times of depression?
7.	How can the prayer in verses 23-24 help you live a more holy life?
Chr	case study for group discussion If best friend from high school is a church-avoider. She sees most istians as hypocrites because, in her opinion, they want to restrict ryone's sexual freedom. Further, she believes Christians are so
foci nee	used on the unborn that they do little for the already-born poor and dy. Using Psalm 139, how could you explain that God cares for all the born and not-yet-born), and so should we?

spiritual disciplines
Daily Examen

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! Psalm 139:23-24

Did God show up today? Did we respond today in a way that would not have honored Him? As we examine our daily walk more closely, we begin to find answers to these questions. And when we begin to observe God's presence through the day, we begin to pursue those times more regularly, in ways that transform our words, attitudes, and interactions with others. Many practice the discipline of a "Daily Examen" at the end of the day, perhaps as part of nightly prayer time. By reflecting on the following types of questions, we can honestly assess our obedience and our testimony. Ask yourself the following questions each night of the coming week:

- For what moment today am I most/least grateful? (give praise, ask forgiveness)
- When did I give the most Christ-like love today? The least?
- Did I live out the fruit of the Spirit today? In what ways?
- Did I have a sense of connection with God today? Did I ignore God's presence today?

"The examen makes us aware of moments that at first we might easily pass by as insignificant, moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives." – Dennis Linn¹⁰



¹⁰ Calhoun, 52.

psalm 37 delight in the Lord	

	psalm 37: delight in the Lord
	background
ma	ollm 37 was written by King David, apparently when he was an old in (see v. 25). Having had the opportunity to see God work over time, wid provides us with principles of godly wisdom.
and	s is another acrostic psalm (Others are Psalms 9-10, 25, 34, 111, 119, d 145.) Each of its stanzas of double verses begins with a successive ter of the Hebrew alphabet. 11
	understanding the psalm
1.	In verses 1, 7, and 8, we are told to "fret not." Based on its use in these verses, what does it mean to "fret not"?
2.	In contrast to those things we are taught not to do, what are four things we should do (verses 1-7)?

¹¹ Boice, vol. 1, 315.

3.	In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of the blessedness of the meek (Matthew 5:5). Several New Testament passages speak of the important virtue of meekness (Galatians 5:22-23, Colossians 3:12, 1 Peter 3:15). Based on verse 11 and the content of this psalm, what does it mean to be meek?
4.	Why is patient waiting (v.7, v. 34) a necessary part of faithfully
4.	following the Lord?
	applying the peglin to your life
5 .	applying the psalm to your life Read verse 4. Does this mean that when we delight in the Lord, He will: a) Give us what we desire? b) Give us the desires He wants us to have? or c) Both?
	Why? Be prepared to discuss your answer with your small group.

6.	What does it mean to "delight yourself in the Lord"?
7.	How can you purpose to do that?
8.	Regarding verse 5 ("Commit your way to the Lord"), commentator James Boice writes: The word actually means, "to roll one's way onto God," the figure being, as H. C. Leupold says, to "dislodge the burden from your shoulders and lay it on God." With this in mind, is there anything significant that you need to commit to the Lord as an act of trust in Him?

¹² Boice, vol.1, 317.

	If so, how can you do that now?
9.	Do you find it difficult to: "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently before Him" (v. 7)?
	How can you prioritize times of quiet in God's presence?
	spiritual disciplines itude–"To Be"
ove	still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself or the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out I devices! Psalm 37:7
	many of us, solitude is a negative word. In our over-stimulated, roverted, fast-paced lives, we have a difficult time knowing what

exactly to do with twenty minutes of solitude. And when we are gifted

this quiet time, we quickly search for ways to remove ourselves from it: just think computer, cell phone, television. But realizing that solitude can be a highly formative period of time along our spiritual journey (as well as our mental and emotional journeys), we should look for ways to prioritize it—much as Jesus would often find time to slip away from the crowds to be alone.

This week, the challenge is to find 15-20 minutes each day when you can give God time and space that is not in competition with social contact, noise, or stimulation. During this time, just "be." As encouraged in Lamentations 3:28, "Sit alone in silence," and commune with God. Prayer may naturally flow from this time, but also use it as an opportunity to release your anxieties to God, to let down whatever false-self you have been tempted to put on that day, to consider His blessings in your life. In short, "Be still before the Lord." And if you have trouble with solitude, the distractions that are vying for your attention will become apparent. Letting loose of the connectivity with the world for this time may prove difficult. Perhaps your thoughts will wander to places that reveal your priorities. Just be before Him and see what happens throughout this week.

We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror. - Dietrich Bonhoeffer ¹³



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¹³ Calhoun, 111.

5 psalm prayIn	86 g God's wor	d	

Chapter 5 psalm 86: praying God's word

Dackground The heading of Psalm 86 tells us it is "a prayer of David." We sometimes overlook the fact that many of the psalms are prayers that include requests as well as praise of God. The content of this psalm indicates that David was facing life-threatening circumstances. He asks God to preserve his life (v. 2) because "a band of ruthless men seeks my life" (v. 14).
Commentator Allan Harman notes that Psalm 86 is remarkable because every verse echoes some other part of the Old Testament. 14
understanding the psalmPsalm 86 contains fifteen specific requests made by King David.

On what basis does David appeal to God to answer him?

¹⁴ Allan Harman, *Psalms, a Mentor Commentary,* vol. 2 (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2011), 639.

2.	Read verses 5 and 15. These beautiful truths about God's character
	echo God's words to Moses found in Exodus 34:6. Take a moment
	to read that verse, along with Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 103:8,
	Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2.

Why are verses 5 and 15 foundational for David's prayer?

3. Note David's request in verse 11. In the ESV, the last phrase in the request is rendered, "Unite my heart to fear your name." Read the verse in at least one more translation. What does it mean for God to "unite" a person's heart to fear His name?

4.	What does it mean to give thanks to God with your "whole heart" (v. 12)?
5.	applying the psalm to your life Read again verses 1-3 of the psalm, noting the combination of dependent humility and trust. How can you approach God with both humility and faith? (See Hebrews 4:14-16 for help with this one.)
6.	Look at verse 11 again. Can you think of a time when you grew to have a more united heart; that is, more wholehearted devotion to God?

7.	See verse 11 once more. Has there been a time in your life when
	you gained more wholehearted devotion to God by trusting Him
	during a crisis?

If so, prepare to share that experience with your small group.

	case study	/ for s	mall ard	oup disc	ussion
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You have a Christian friend who tends to be judgmental toward other Christians who face suffering. He maintains that a sinless life and unwavering faith in God's promises will always guarantee the answers we want in prayer. Using Psalm 86 as your guide, how would you steer your friend toward a more accurate understanding of prayer and its place in one's relationship with God?

spiritual disciplines

Fixed-Hour Prayer

Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace. Psalm 86:6

Many of us have a fixed time each day for prayer. Most of these times are convenient to our schedules and our preferences. Attending to a "fixed-hour prayer" discipline requires that we intentionally honor God at certain times throughout the day. We stop what we are doing and rediscover God's presence throughout the day, not just at times that are convenient for us. This discipline can be powerful. It can shape our day and our relationship with God and others. It can also make us painfully aware where our devotions lie.

There are many approaches, but the key is to begin where you are and build from there. If you have a current time, then add one or two more. If you have a couple of times now, then add a few more. These prayers can be short spontaneous prayers, Scriptural prayers (the Lord's Prayer, the Shema¹⁵), or liturgical prayers (Book of Common Prayer). You may set a fixed time—6am, noon, 3pm, and 9pm—or you may pray every hour on the hour. The fact that David (Psalm 119) prayed seven times a day, and Daniel (Daniel 6:10) prayed three times daily, and even the Apostles (the Book of Acts) had fixed times of prayer, all indicate the importance of stopping what we are doing and acknowledging our God throughout the day.

Note: There are many prayer resources on the River Oaks website: riveroakschurch.org/resources/spiritual-growth



¹⁵ Taken from the Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear."

psalms 42 and 43 coming out of spiritual depression
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psalm 42 and 43: coming out of spiritual depression
background Many commentators believe Psalms 42 and 43 should be understood together. In some Hebrew manuscripts, the two psalms are joined as one unit. The refrain that includes, "Why are you cast down, O my soul" appears in 42:5, 42:11, and 43:5. Both psalms deal with the theme of spiritual depression.
The heading of Psalm 42 credits the Sons of Korah with its composition. These men were temple priests who were responsible for worship music.
understanding the psalm 1. What does it mean for the soul to thirst for God (v. 2)?

2. What does it mean to "pour out" your soul (v. 4)?

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¹⁶ Boice, vol. 2, 367.

3.	What is the reason for the psalmist's hope in God despite his circumstances?
4.	applying the psalm to your life How is it possible to trust God when you don't sense His nearness or goodness to you?
	Can you think of a time when Jesus expressed both deep
	discouragement and trust in the Father?

5.	What are three truths about God you should remember in times of discouragement? Be prepared to share these with your small group.
6.	What is the value of remembering the great things God has done for you in the past?
	Do you keep a journal to record and remember these things?

What is, or could be, the value of journaling in your spiritual growth?

	spiritual disciplines
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These things I remember, as I pour out my soul ... Psalm 42:4

Keeping a spiritual journal is a way of paying attention to our lives, and to God's presence in our lives. It's also a way of recording life lessons, the highs and the lows, for a future self to draw upon. The beauty of this discipline is that it can be a highly individualized and creative process. Entries can include prayers, Scripture, quotes, thoughts about our failings, our hopes, and our questions.

Whether electronically, or in the good, old-fashioned, written form, try to record seven journal entries in the next seven days. With at least one of your entries, compose a prayer that is an honest expression of a current situation, a praise for His care for you, and a recollection of God's promises. (Consider sharing these prayers in next week's group time.)

This may, or may not, be your favorite discipline to complete, but give it a try and watch as your thoughts and prayers stare back at you on the paper (screen) to see if God is speaking to you through this process.

"The most important part about a prayer journal is that it is written from the heart."

lords-prayer-words.com/prayers_before/prayer_journal



psalm 34 magnifying the Lord in adversity

Psalm 34: magnifying the Lord in adversity
background Psalm 34 is one of fourteen psalms with a heading that provides historical background for the psalm's composition. This heading links the psalm to David's flight from King Saul. In his desperation, David fled to the Philistine city of Gath, where he pretended to be insane before the Philistine King Achish. (The heading of Psalm 34 refers to Achish by the title of his dynasty-"Abimelech.")
Read 1 Samuel 21:10-15 in preparation for this study.
understanding the psalm
 Based on David's circumstances recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10-15, what might reasonably have been David's attitude or state of mind at this time?

2. Where is David's focus in this psalm?

3.	What are three things David wants to teach others (including us) in this psalm?
4.	See verses 11-14, then read the Apostle Peter's application of this passage in 1 Peter 3:8-12. How do our words indicate whether we truly have "the fear of the Lord" (Psalm 34:11)?
5.	Note verse 20, then read John 19:31-37. How does Jesus fulfill Psalm 34:19-20 as the only truly "righteous" person?

6.	applying the psalm to your life Given David's circumstances, what surprises you most about Psalm 34?
7.	What does it mean to "magnify the Lord"?
	How can you do that?

8.	What are three truths from this psalm you hope to apply to your life?
9.	What truths from this psalm could you use to encourage a friend who is "crushed in spirit" (v. 18)?

spiritual disciplines

Nicene Creed

Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together! Psalm 34:3

The Nicene Creed was composed in AD 325 as a statement of the Christian faith. By order of the Emperor Constantine, the council in Nicaea (modern-day Turkey) met to affirm their faith in the area of Christology within the church. Ultimately, the creed was drawn up to repudiate an elder of the Egyptian church who was denying that Jesus was fully God. A similar historical church document, the Apostles' Creed, was written to address Gnosticism and its message, denying Jesus as fully man.

Creeds are not regularly recited in the worship services of many protestant denominations, particularly in the West. However, the core doctrinal beliefs of most, including the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and River Oaks Community Church, align with these creeds. When these creeds are given sincere thought and proper meaning, there is great benefit to the unified affirmation of our faith. They allow believers to reaffirm their theology and allow nonbelievers to question their opposition to the faith.

Take a moment in small group time to recite the Nicene Creed as a group. Continue to contemplate its meanings and your ability to express these foundational pillars of Christianity to others. Consider reciting it with your family during the week. Over the next several weeks at River Oaks, we are planning to recite these words during our Sunday morning worship services. As we do, carefully consider each line and each statement of belief.

The Nicene Creed (modern wording)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,

and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son).

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead,

and the life of the world to come. AMEN.



8 psalm 90 time and eternity	

psalm 90: time and eternity

background

Psalm 90 is ascribed to Moses, and this means it is probably the oldest of the 150 psalms. This beautiful prayer of Moses contrasts the eternity of God with the brevity of human life. (Keep in mind that Moses lived to be 120 years old! See Deuteronomy 34:7.)

Psalm 90 serves as the basis for an enduring hymn written by Isaac Watts (1674-1748):

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come, Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home.

understanding the psalm

Verse 1 refers to the Lord as "our dwelling place."
 See also Deuteronomy 33:27, where the same words are used of God. (The NIV translates "dwelling place" as "refuge" in Deuteronomy 33:27.) Why does Moses say this about God?

See verse 4, then read 2 Peter 3:8 where it appears Peter is quoting this verse. How does God's view of time differ from our own?
See verses 7-11. Why is an understanding of God's wrath necessary in order to comprehend His true nature?
How can God be both holy and loving at the same time?

4.	Note verse 14. How has God's steadfast love been revealed for us in Jesus Christ?
	How are we spared from God's righteous wrath against sin? (See 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10.)
 5.	applying the psalm to your life See verses 12-17. What are three prayers here that you could pray for yourself?

6.	What w (v. 17)?	vould it mean for God to establish the work of your hands
7.		ould a right understanding of God's eternity and the ess of our own time on earth affect:
		your use of money?
		your use of time?
		your devotion to God and to the work of His kingdom?
		, con de l'out et de la contra de l'out et l'out

spiritual disciplines

Westminster Confession of Faith - Catechisms

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Psalm 90:1

As the Nicene Creed expresses a unified standard of belief for Christianity, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and associated catechisms, provide a doctrinal foundation to our reformed theology and Presbyterian tradition. The Confession of Faith was drawn up in 1646 by the Westminster Assembly to be the confession of faith for the Church of England. Additionally, the longer and shorter catechisms were written at this same time and have been used for teaching the Christian faith ever since.

We currently use a modern English version of these documents; they can be found at the following EPC link:

epc.org/about-the-epc/beliefs/westminster-confession/

With a clear understanding that these documents are, and will always be, viewed as subordinate to Scripture, they are important documents to deeper discipleship in the Scriptures. The Confession of Faith covers 35 critical areas of Christianity, from Scripture to God to Sanctification to Love and Missions. The catechisms (from Greek "catechesis," meaning "instruction by word of mouth") were used by the early reformation churches, from which they revived the early third- and fourth-century church process of instruction. The shorter catechism has 107 questions/answers (each with in-depth Scripture references), while the longer catechism has 196 questions/answers. The shorter would be more appropriate for a confirmation class, while the longer would be excellent for personal or small group study with greater detail.

An interesting exercise would be for small groups to review these documents. How familiar are we with these foundational beliefs? Can we answer the catechism questions that have been taught for

generations and generations? (Question 1—and its answer—from the shorter catechism, are shown below.) Are there questions regarding the confession of faith doctrines? Are there opportunities to grow and reach others as a result of being unified in the understanding of our faith?

Q[#]1: What is man's primary purpose?

A#1: Man's primary purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

- 1 Corinthians 10:31, Romans 11:36, Psalms 73:24-28, John 17:22-24

psalm 31 refuge in God's steadfast love	

background
Psalm 31 was written by King David, evidently during a time when his adversaries were seeking to take his life (vv. 11-13). This was likely during his flight from either King Saul (1 Samuel 23:14-15; 24:1) or from David's own son, Absalom (2 Samuel 15:23, 28). The psalm is one of

psalm 31: refuge in God's steadfast love

Language from Psalm 31 seems to have been used in later biblical books. The prophet Jeremiah used the phrase "terror on every side," from verse 13, six times in his writings. The prophet Jonah spoke of "those who pay regard to worthless idols," from verse 6. Perhaps the best-known verse in Psalm 31 is verse 5, "Into your hand I commit my spirit." These words were used by Jesus as He died on the cross:

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46)

understanding the psalm

1. Why is David so confident despite his circumstances?

trust in God despite life-threatening circumstances.

2.	What does this psalm teach us about God's awareness of our sufferings?
	Which verses support your answer?
3.	What does the psalmist mean by the words, "My times are in you hand" (v. 15)?

4.	Note the personal words of verses 19 and 20: "refuge in you," "your presence," "your shelter." Why has David become so aware of God's presence and care?
5.	What truths does David teach us in the final verses (vv. 23 and 24) of the psalm?
<u> </u>	applying the psalm to your life List three or four truths about God we should hold on to when we

face adversity.

7.	What is the greatest outcome that could result from a severe trial?
8.	In times of suffering, some people turn away from God in hurt and anger. Others, like David, grow to love Him more. What accounts for the difference?
	the difference:
Sal	spiritual disciplines bbath
In y	you, O Lord, do I take refuge Psalm 31:1
the	Exodus 20:8-10, we find the fourth commandment: "Remember Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all ir work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God."
Doe	es God's fourth commandment still apply to us today?
Ηον	w you answer this question depends much on whether you view the

Sabbath as a blessing or a burden. If you are attempting to abide by the Sabbath in the way that the Pharisees interpreted it, then it is likely a

in Him by adding so many rules and regulations, that it actually had become yet another day of labor just to comply with the law. On the other hand, if you consider the examples that Jesus shows us in Mark 2:23-28 and in Mark 3:1-16, then it is likely a blessing. In these passages, Jesus teaches that walking the fields, plucking the grain, healing (doing good to others), are not violations of the Sabbath. In fact, Jesus pointed out, didn't they know that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27)?

Then what are we to do today? When we consider the Sabbath to be a blessing to man, then how do we honor it and keep it holy? As you discuss this as a group, consider that God does want to give us rest. He designed us in a way to work hard for six days and then to rest in Him and His creation for a day. He also doesn't want us to become legalistic in this area. So consider taking your Sabbath this coming week in a purposeful manner. Unplug from the connected life and let go of things that create stress. Refrain from work for the day and practice relaxing activities, such as walking, exercising, or picnicking with the family. Catch up on time in Scripture, enjoy devotional conversation over coffee, rest.

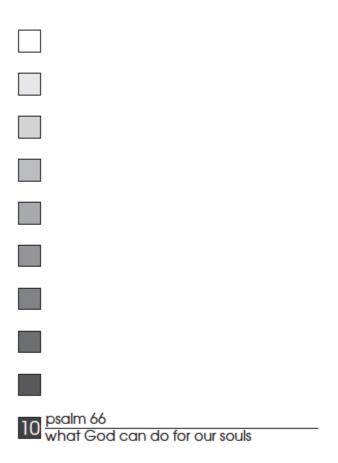
The Sabbath is a gift from God for repetitive and regular rest. It is a time for *being* in our busy life of *doing*. Find your Sabbath day this week and commit to honoring it in the weeks to come.

Sabbath is not dependent upon our readiness to stop. We do not stop when we are finished. We do not stop when we complete our phone calls, finish our project, get through this stack of messages, or get out his report that is due tomorrow. We stop because it is time to stop.

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¹⁷ Calhoun, 40.



Psalm 66: what God can do for our souls

background The heading of Psalm 66 tells us it was written as a song for the "choirmaster." There is a clear progression in the call to praise God throughout the psalm. Emphasis flows from, "All the earth," (verse 1) to, "O peoples," (verse 8) to the psalmist himself (verses 13-20).
The psalm also refers to past suffering both by God's people (vv. $11-12$) and by the psalmist himself (v.14).
understanding the psalm How would you describe the worship called for in verses 1-2?

2. Read Psalm 65:12-13 and Psalm 66:4. If nature worships God, why are humans (including many Christians) reluctant to praise Him?

3.	See verses 8-15. In what way did the suffering of the psalmist lead to deeper devotion to the Lord?
	Why is he eager to tell others about this?
4.	Note verse 18. What role does repentance seem to have played in
	the writer's experience of renewal?

applying the psalm to your life Do you find it easy or hard to praise God vocally?
If easy, what has helped you learn to praise God?
If difficult, how can the truths of this psalm help you more adequately give praise to the Lord?

6.	How can the knowledge of God's rule over creation and the nations help you trust Him to work in the midst of your trials and suffering?
7.	See verses 13-15. Have you ever made a promise to God when you were in serious trouble?
	Now read Hebrews 10:19-22. How has Jesus done away with the need for us to make burnt offerings and sacrifices?

What is a better option than making vows to God when in trouble?
Read verses 18-20 again. Why is it difficult to pray with confidence when we have unconfessed sin in our lives?

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Song - Celebration

Shout for joy to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! Psalm 66:1-2¹⁸

There are many references throughout Scripture that speak to God's gift of joy and celebration. In the church, we most often find this expression of joy through song. More importantly, however, is the joy expressed from deep down in our heart on a daily basis. We all face difficulties, and sometimes we find it easier to shout for joy than others. But we always have cause for joy—giving God the praise and honor and glory that He deserves. Much as it is written in Psalm 126:2: "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy; and it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'" 19

As we conclude our Drawing Near II study, take time this week to shout for joy for all that God has done. Crank up the worship music, dance around the living room, share some quality time with small group members around a meal, laugh often, and take back that God-given joy that the world so readily attempts to steal. Celebration is contagious; spread some around.



^{18,19} NIV translation.

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