

Extraordinary
PRAYER



Extraordinary PRAYER

USING GOD'S WORD TO EXPAND YOUR PRAYER LIFE

MARYBETH McCULLUM

Dedicated to my mom, Joan Callahan.

*The first person to introduce me to Jesus and to show
me the value of studying God's Word.*

*One generation commends your works to another;
they tell of your mighty acts. Psalm 145:4*

*Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful servants.*

*Truly I am your servant, Lord;
I serve you just as my mother did; Psalm 116:15-16a*

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STUDY OVERVIEW

I'm so glad you've decided to participate in this study! Each session begins with *comprehension* questions designed to ensure you understand the material and notice specific details.

Additionally, you'll find *interpretation* questions. These will help you delve a bit deeper into the passages to understand what they mean

You'll also discover *application* questions. These lead you to take what you've learned from the text and apply it to your life.

Each session also includes *Personal Reflection/Prayer Journal* prompts designed to help you expand and deepen your times with the Lord. This is your opportunity to put what you're learning about prayer into practice. At times this may be challenging, but don't give up! Pushing yourself to pray in new ways will expand your comfort zone and help you to grow spiritually. Be sure to read all the prompts even if you don't have time to answer them. They will plant seeds that will blossom in your prayer times later.

Each session ends by encouraging you to jot down what you want to remember, what you learned, what stood out to you, or what you want to incorporate into your prayer life. I encourage you to write your answers at the end of the study on the *Prayer Practices* page. You'll be thankful to have this resource to enhance your prayers once you finish this study.

STUDY TIPS

There are a few practices you can adopt that will help you to get the most out of this study.

- Schedule a consistent time to work on each session throughout the week. Ideally, you'll absorb what you're learning better if you do one part each day rather than trying to do the entire session in one sitting. You won't want to rush through personal reflection and prayer journaling.
- Engage with a small group. The combination of doing the study on your own and meeting with others to discuss it will enrich the experience and enhance your learning.

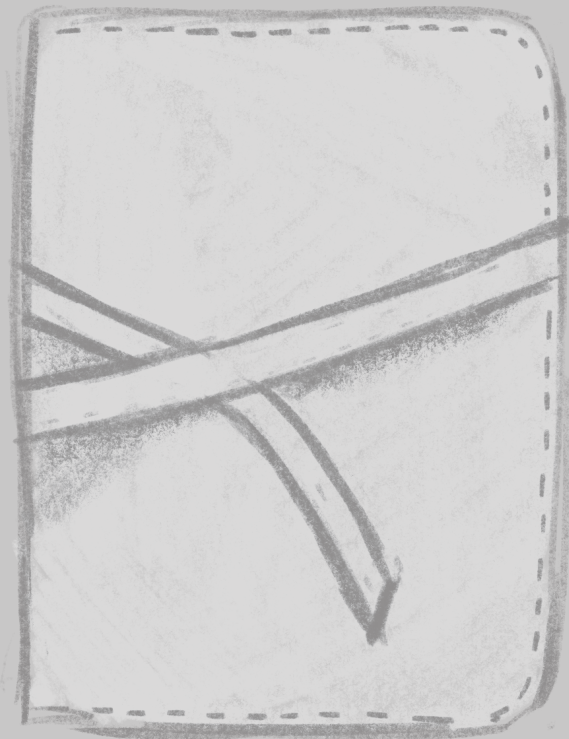
- Use the small group discussion guide at the end of each session to facilitate your time together.
- Write your prayers in the space provided in each session or in a separate journal. Label each prayer with the date, session number/part for the prayer prompt to which you're responding.

SMALL GROUP GROUND RULES

- Designate a facilitator who will lead the group through the discussion. They should review the group discussion questions at the end of each session in advance and/ or choose any other questions for discussion.
- Participate in the discussion actively. Listen to others and engage with them throughout the time together. Be honest and authentic.
- Be concise and mindful of giving others a chance to share as well.
- Keep what's shared in the group confidential. Remember stories shared are not yours to re-tell. Your group will become a safe place when everyone knows they can trust each other.
- Rely on Scripture for truth, not on worldly wisdom.
- Assume the best about group members—don't feel threatened if someone in the group doesn't share your views and opinions. Keep the focus on Scripture, not issues.
- Share prayer requests, but don't use group time solving one person's problems. Grapple together and apply the truth you're learning, but schedule time outside the group if you need to delve deeper.
- Respect group members' commitment by starting and ending on time. Ask someone in the group to serve as a timekeeper, if needed.
- Open and close your group time in prayer. Pray with and for other members in your group during your time together and between meetings.

SESSION 1

Extraordinary Prayer



CONNECTING WITH GOD IN NEW WAYS

Wedging the last of my bags into the car, reality was beginning to sink in. I'd watched from the sidelines as each of my four older siblings had left home for college. At long last, it was my turn. Although I knew I should've been excited, I felt dread more than anything else. I was heading into a new and unknown world in an enormous city 350 miles from home. I'd chosen a school no one else in my family had attended, thinking it would be exciting to have a fresh start. However, the enthusiasm of my initial decision had turned to dread. The distance between us now felt daunting.

As I climbed into the car, my older sister handed me a small blue book. With a knowing smile she said, "Here, it's a journal. It may come in handy when you get there." I thanked her, tucked it into my bag, and promptly forgot about it.

My first few weeks away were filled with tears and anguished calls home. I felt lonely, unknown, and insignificant in a sea of strangers. I longed to find meaningful friendships, but most of my peers seemed intent on going to parties, meeting boys, and establishing robust social lives. From my vantage point, everyone seemed to be having so much fun. Meanwhile, I tried to put on a brave façade and cried into my pillow at night.

It was in those early weeks away that I remembered that little blue journal my sister had given me. It seemed like a good addition to my new morning routine. I'd found that reading the Bible and praying helped me to feel less alone and reassured me of God's presence. Still, as I prayed silently, distractions often crowded my mind, causing me to lose focus. Remembering the gift from my sister, I wondered if writing prayers in my new journal might help me to stay engaged. The first time I opened it, a flood of words poured from my mind onto the pages, almost faster than my pen could write. Finally, I'd found a safe outlet for processing my thoughts and feelings without restraint. The journal became a conduit for communication with Jesus unlike anything I'd ever experienced. He became my closest companion—the confidante I'd been seeking all along. My tears and homesickness abated, and the frantic calls home ceased. Eventually, I branched out and developed friendships with a newfound confidence. The pressure to find the perfect friend was gone; I'd already discovered One who would never fail me.

The practice of writing in my prayer journal continued throughout college and into adulthood. Today my attic has several storage boxes filled with journals containing prayers scrawled in my messy handwriting. The words aren't eloquent, but they reveal evidence of an ever-deepening connection to Jesus.

Sprinkled throughout the journals are passages from Scripture that have spoken to me over the years. Sometimes I've borrowed verses and have made them my personal prayers; other times I've asked God for help understanding how to apply them. Many of the passages in this study are ones I've returned to numerous times for wisdom, hope, direction, and encouragement. One thing is certain: the more I practice prayer, the more confident I've become in the power of our extraordinary God.

How would you describe your prayer life? Perhaps it's rich and vibrant, but you're looking for ways to expand it further. Or, maybe you question whether you're using the proper words, making the right requests, or asking too often. Do you ever wonder if God has a limit to the number of petitions we can make? Perhaps you don't think you deserve His time and attention. Or maybe your prayers have grown stale and you're just ready for some fresh inspiration. Even if your interactions with the Lord feel robust and healthy, there's likely something new you can add to deepen your prayer life.

This study is designed to answer your questions, ease your misgivings, and ignite your passion for prayer. Together we'll look at ordinary people in Scripture who encountered an extraordinary God. Their words are authentic and honest. They also reveal an understanding of His character and will. We'll examine their lives, the contexts of their stories, and the actual words they said (and some of the words God spoke to them). We'll see that, like us, they were flawed people who were learning to trust a perfect God. They weren't worried about being eloquent; they just wanted to know the Lord and to understand His ways.

As part of the weekly lessons, you'll also see prompts with ideas for prayers you can write in a journal. Please don't skip this part as it's the place where you'll grow the most by putting what you're learning into practice.

Before we go any further, let's take some time to evaluate your personal thoughts about prayer. This is a tool for you, not something you need to share with anyone else (unless you want to, of course). Don't labor over the questions, just jot down the first answers that come to mind.

PART 1: *Prayer Self-Evaluation*

1. How would you define prayer?
2. Do you pray? If so, what are the usual topics of your prayers?
3. Where and when do you pray?
4. Do you have any special model or format you follow when you pray?
5. Do you address prayers to God the Father, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit?
(Do you think it even matters?)
6. How do you pray? Silently & alone? Aloud with others? In writing? In songs? Some other way?
7. Do you ever worry that you're praying the wrong way?
8. Do you wait expectantly for answers to your prayers?
9. Do you ever get disappointed or confused when answers to your prayers don't turn out the way you'd hoped?
10. Are there certain times when you pray more frequently?
What are the circumstances?
11. Have you had an experience with prayer that changed or inspired you?
12. Is there anything that causes hesitation in you about writing prayers in a journal?

By the end of our time together, it's likely we're going to find a Bible character who felt or experienced similar things.

PART 2: *Defining Prayer*

1. Let's start by clarifying what prayer is and why we do it. James 4:8a tells us, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." **Now, look up Jeremiah 29:13** and record what God says to His people in the space below:

2. What do you think it means to seek God with all your heart? What do you think that would look like in your daily life?

“

Put simply, prayer is the act of drawing near to God. It is intentionally engaging in communication with Him, acknowledging God's presence in your life by interacting with Him.

”

3. How does the idea of prayer as ongoing communication with God match up with your experiences with prayer?

First and foremost, prayer is about seeking God. It is about developing a relationship with Him, discovering His character and His will so that you can learn how to align yourself with His plans.

“

We pray to get God, not to get stuff from God.

”

PART 3: *Types of Prayer*

Many people view prayer as a way to ask God for help. This is one type of prayer, but there are several others we'll explore in this session.

ADORATION, PRAISE, WORSHIP & ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

These types of prayers focus on praising God for who He is. They highlight the Lord's attributes, name, and character. When we focus on His specific qualities at the beginning of our prayers, this settles our spirits because we remember that God is bigger and more powerful than we are. Prayers of adoration focus on *who* God is, not on *what* He has done for us. For example, Psalm 145 praises Him for being gracious, compassionate, good, loving, and righteous. Regardless of what's going on in our lives, God deserves our praise.

Another aspect of this type of prayer is acknowledgement. When we acknowledge God as the sovereign authority over our lives, we take a position of humility. Prayers of acknowledgement honor the Lord and put Him in His rightful place. We'll discover that many prayers in Scripture start with adoration and acknowledgement.

1. **Look up James 4:10** and record it below:

2. According to this verse, what happens when we approach the Lord with humility? How does this put both you and Him in the proper place?

“

Let's start our prayers in a posture of humility by praising God for His specific character qualities. Focus on acknowledging God for who He is, not just what He does.

”

CONFESSION & REPENTANCE

Prayers of confession and repentance are another way of humbling ourselves by recognizing our sins, confessing them, and asking forgiveness from God. The word “sin” is an archery term that means “missing the mark.” Any attitude or behavior that misses the mark of perfection separates us from God—whether it misses the bullseye by a few inches or a few feet. This includes obvious sins like murder, as well as more subtle ones like envy or bitterness. So, we start out by naming our sins and asking to be cleansed. God purifies us from sins, but there still may be consequences we need to face.

Confession is followed by repentance, the act of turning away from sin and going in the opposite direction. Although we aim to please God, we are still imperfect and are going to sin in different ways. Confessing our sins specifically enables us to recognize them and to turn away from them. It's helpful to make confession and repentance a regular part of our prayer life so that we don't let our sins bog us down.

1. **Look up 1 John 1:9** and write it in the space below:

2. What does God do when we confess our sins? How is this reassuring?

3. Is the concept of sin familiar to you? Who or what shaped your view of it?

4. What do you think of the idea that confession and repentance need to be a regular part of prayer?

5. How easy is it for you to identify and confess your sins? Why do you think this is the case?

If you feel unclear on how to recognize sin in your life, reading the Bible is a great help. God uses His Word to teach us. It helps us understand our sins and how they separate us from the Lord. The Bible doesn't clarify what sin is to make us feel guilty or to punish us, but to help us maintain a right relationship with God. He reveals areas in our lives that are missing the mark and is merciful in giving us opportunities to confess and repent.

THANKSGIVING

This element of prayer focuses on thanking God for specifics in our lives and the world around us. You might thank God for certain prayers He has answered or for the ways you've seen Him act on your behalf. Philippians 4:6 tells us: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." When we thank God for what He's already done before we make new requests, it reminds us of His faithfulness and trustworthiness. Thanking the Lord is a way to recognize His hand at work in our lives. Prayers of gratitude help us practice trusting God whether we see the bigger picture or not. Like prayers of adoration and worship, many of the people we'll study start out their prayers with thankfulness to God.

1. Think about a recent time when you performed a kind gesture and the recipient thanked you for it. How did this make you feel?

2. Now think about a recent time when you made a kind gesture on behalf of another person and they didn't acknowledge it. How did this make you feel?

3. Based on your answers, why might it be beneficial for you to express gratitude to God in your prayers? How might it make Him feel?

“

God isn't dependent upon our praise or gratitude,
but He is worthy of all glory and honor.

”

INTERCESSION & SUPPLICATION

These are very “churchy” sounding words for the most common types of prayer—asking God for help. Prayers of intercession are our requests for others (we are interceding with God on their behalf). Prayers of supplication are simply our requests to God for any needs we have personally. As we study prayers in Scripture, we'll see many of them focus on seeking God's will rather than asking Him to do things in a specific way. Some of the people we'll read about show great humility by acknowledging that God knows better than they do. As we study the Bible, we'll try to follow their examples and focus our requests on aligning with God's will. We'll grow in understanding and trusting that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Some faith traditions end prayers by saying, “In Jesus' name.” In John 14:13-14 Jesus says, “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” So, praying in Jesus name isn't just a way to wrap up a prayer before saying “Amen.” It's praying for the things that Jesus would want so the Father may be glorified. The idea of praying God's will is a big concept that will come up repeatedly throughout the study, so don't worry if it's not totally clear for you right now.

“

Amen is a word of biblical Hebrew
origin meaning “So be it.”

”

1. **Look up 1 John 5:14** and fill in the blanks below. (This is the New International Version)

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we _____ anything according to _____, he hears us.”

2. How does this motivate you to want to learn more about understanding God's will?

3. Does anything confuse or discourage you about it?

The four types of prayer we've looked at are the most common ones. You may find it helpful to use the acronym “ACTS” as a model for your prayers. Fill in the blanks for each type. (Hint: Look back at the headings for the different types of prayer we've covered already.)

A is for _____: start your prayers by acknowledging specifics about God's character.

C is for _____: confess and repent of any sins you're aware of in your life.

T is for _____: thank God for specific things He's done in your life.

S is for _____: ask God for help (for others and for yourself)

CONSECRATION & EQUIPPING

These types of prayers are important but may not be a part of your daily conversations with the Lord. Prayers of consecration are a way to offer a person, ministry, or place for God's use and to ask His blessing over it. Before moving into a new home, you might consecrate it to be used to bless others and honor God. Or you might pray for God to equip a person or group with specific spiritual resources like wisdom or mercy before sending them on a mission trip or to start a new ministry.

We can invite God to equip us to serve Him each day, whether it is informally through the people we interact with or formally through someplace where we are working, volunteering, or serving in ministry. Equipping prayers invite God to fill us with His Spirit to be used in ways that honor Him. In Luke 11:13, Jesus says, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

4. What is an area of life you could ask God to equip you to serve Him more intentionally? For example: in your home, at work, online/ social media, on a team, at school, in your neighborhood, etc.

PART 4: *Journaling*

Throughout this study you're encouraged to keep a prayer journal. You can use the space provided in each session or get a separate blank book. Whatever works for you is perfect. This will be a consistent place to communicate your thoughts to God in writing. It doesn't need to be eloquent and no one else needs to read it. Set the goal of responding to the prompts in the homework several times a week. The prayers don't need to be long—just start with a few sentences. I'd encourage you to read all the prompts, even if you don't write responses for each one. My prayer is that each of them will draw you into a closer, deeper connection with God over time.

Start by choosing one or more of the prompts to pray about as you write in your journal this week. In the future, they will be included throughout the lessons and will help you to expand and deepen your communication with God. Choose the prompt that resonates with you most. Or do several, if you have time.

PERSONAL REFLECTION/ PRAYER JOURNAL:

- Use the self-evaluation questions you answered in Part 1 as a jumping off place to talk with God. Tell Him your questions and concerns about prayer. Ask Him to help you be more consistent and disciplined in your prayer life.
- Tell God the biggest concerns you have right now and invite Him to walk with you through them.
- Share what you're thankful for with the Lord. Try to notice things you might take for granted typically.
- Try out one or two elements of prayer on different days (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Intercession, Petition, Equipping). Write a few sentences for each one. Don't worry if it sounds eloquent or not—this is just between you and God. He just wants to hear your heart. He doesn't care about your writing skills.

SESSION 1 GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What are you looking forward to about this study?
2. What resonated with you in the opening story? Do you see yourself in any of the different perspectives on prayer mentioned in it?
3. What did you learn about yourself and your prayer life from the Self-Evaluation in Part 1?
4. How does your definition of prayer match up with the explanation in Part 2? Is there anything new or noteworthy that bolsters your understanding of prayer?
5. Were the types of prayer described in Part 3 familiar to you? Did any of the explanations expand your understanding of prayer? Did any surprise you or bring up new questions?
6. Which Bible verses were meaningful to you in this session? Why?
7. How was the journaling experience for you? Did anything about it surprise you? What will you do differently next week? What will you repeat? How can your group pray for you about this?
8. What do you want to remember from this session? Did you write it on the Prayer Practices Page already? If not, be sure to jot it down there so you won't forget!

PRAYER PRACTICES: What do you want to remember from this session? Jot down lessons learned, “a-ha” moments, or practices you want to incorporate into your prayer life. Make a running list at the end of the study on page 252.

SESSION 1 NOTES

