

A STUDY GUIDE FOR *PRAYER: OUR DEEPEST LONGING*
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Introduction

In *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing*, you are invited to explore the richness of prayer and develop a new approach to praying, one that fully engages our hearts and the spirit of God alive in us. Profound yet practical, this book will encourage you to establish a daily practice, emphasizing that at the core of a good prayer life lies the commitment to simply being there on a regular basis.

The study guide will help you break open the richness of the book itself and go deeper into your own practice of prayer. This guide can be used by individuals or in a small group and is adaptable to your particular situation. Use the questions here as suggestions, and add your own to enhance the discussion or reflection. You might want to have a journal available to write down your thoughts and reactions as you go through the book.

Most of all, let this study guide allow you to more deeply open your mind and heart to the joy of active conversation with God in prayer.

Session 1

Struggling in Prayer

To begin, set the mood for reflection and prayer by finding a quiet place, lighting a candle, and/or playing a hymn or instrumental music in the background. Have a Bible and a copy of *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing* at hand.

Scripture

Read Luke 10:38-42

Meditation

Close your eyes and remember you are in the presence of God. Recall a passage or phrase from the Scripture reading, then spend a few minutes silently reflecting on these words and what they mean in your life right now.

For Reflection or Discussion

1. “Most days, we don’t pray simply because we don’t quite get around to it” (p. 1). What are some of the things that stand in the way of your taking time for prayer each day?
2. What have you done when “stuck in a rut” with prayer? Did you abandon your daily practice or try a new way of praying? How can boredom enrich your prayer?
3. “We tell God what we think God wants to hear” (p. 6). What would you most like to tell God right now, without any boundaries or preconceptions?
4. “[In] the Hebrew ideal of perfection... to be perfect simply means to walk with God, despite our flaws” (p. 9). What “flaws” are you trying to accept in your life? How might they become part of your prayer?

5. "Trust and enthusiasm are our nakedness, our bare flesh" (p. 11).
Consider doing something this week that would encourage a sense of trust and enthusiasm in you. Make it an opportunity for prayer.
6. "We are attentive to so many things that, ultimately, we aren't attentive to anything" (p. 12). What deep thing inside you can you hold up to God today? Shut out the world for a few minutes as you think about what this might be.

Are there any other questions that arose while reading this chapter? Reflect on these, or talk about them with your small group or someone close to you.

Prayer Practice

During the next few days, try praying in several different ways. Take a walk and focus on the presence of God. Sit quietly for a while, clearing your mind of thoughts and meditating on a holy word or phrase. Write a few spontaneous prayers, expressing your feelings to God in an honest way.

Closing Prayer

God of all creation, enlighten me that I may see you in all I do. Send your Spirit into the patterns of my life, that I may find freshness and clarity in the rituals and routines of my days. Your love sustains me, O Lord. Amen.

Session 2

Hearing God's Voice in Prayer

To begin, set the mood for reflection and prayer by finding a quiet place, lighting a candle, and/or playing a hymn or instrumental music in the background. Have a Bible and a copy of *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing* at hand.

Scripture

Read 1 Kings 19:9-13a

Meditation

Close your eyes and remember you are in the presence of God. Recall a passage or phrase from the Scripture reading, then spend a few minutes silently reflecting on these words and what they mean in your life right now.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. "We need to discern the unique cadence of God's voice" (p. 16). What are some of the ways you most clearly hear God's voice?
2. Concerning God and faith, what are your greatest fears?
3. "Experiencing the unconditional love of God is what prayer, in the end, is all about" (p. 18). Has there been someone in your life who you felt loved you unconditionally? What did that mean to how you see God?
4. "Faith says that God is real... We are in safe hands" (p. 22). Does believing this is true eliminate all fear and anxiety? Why or why not?
5. "The power [the apostles] admired and wanted was Jesus's power to love and forgive his enemies" (p. 22). How is the power to love and forgive related to prayer?
6. What place does solitude have in your life?

Are there any other questions that arose while reading this chapter? Reflect on these, or talk about them with your small group or someone close to you.

Prayer Practice

Look for ways to find solitude in your life this week. Get up a bit earlier in the morning, or leave your work for a few minutes during the day to take a walk or just sit quietly. Empty your mind of thoughts and make room for the voice of God to enter. Nurture silence, at least for a brief time.

Closing Prayer

God of all creation, you delight in me, your flawed yet beautiful child. I will make a place for you in my mind and heart. There I will rest in your peace and celebrate your boundless love and kindness. You are my stream of living water, O Lord. Amen.

Session 3

Understanding Priestly Prayer

To begin, set the mood for reflection and prayer by finding a quiet place, lighting a candle, and/or playing a hymn or instrumental music in the background. Have a Bible and a copy of *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing* at hand.

Scripture

Read Luke 11:1-10

Meditation

Close your eyes and remember you are in the presence of God. Recall a passage or phrase from the Scripture reading, then spend a few minutes silently reflecting on these words and what they mean in your life right now.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you define the difference between devotional (or affective) prayer and liturgical (or priestly) prayer?
2. “Too often we cannot enjoy what is legitimate and given us by God” (p. 31). Think of something you truly enjoy. How is it a celebration of God’s gracious love?
3. “Good liturgy is good psychology” (p. 32). What is your usual experience of Sunday liturgy? Is it joyful and uplifting? Uninspiring and rote? A combination of positive and negative? How is this affected by what you bring to the Mass?
4. What does it mean to be a member of the body of Christ?
5. How would you answer this question: “What are the antibodies that create a healthy immune system within the body of Christ” (p. 35)?

Are there any other questions that arose while reading this chapter? Reflect on these, or talk about them with your small group or someone close to you.

Prayer Practice

True conversion begins within us; only by making changes in ourselves can we begin to change the world around us. What change can you make in your own life that will have wider implications in other areas? What small steps can you make to start the process?

Closing Prayer

God of all creation, let me be your hands and your heart in the world. I offer my service to you and to my neighbor, echoing the love and care you show to all. You make the sun to shine and the rain to fall on good and bad alike; help me to be more like you. Amen.

Session 4

Practicing Affective Prayer

To begin, set the mood for reflection and prayer by finding a quiet place, lighting a candle, and/or playing a hymn or instrumental music in the background. Have a Bible and a copy of *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing* at hand.

Scripture

Read Psalm 139:1-12

Meditation

Close your eyes and remember you are in the presence of God. Recall a passage or phrase from the Scripture reading, then spend a few minutes silently reflecting on these words and what they mean in your life right now.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. After his resurrection, Jesus asks Mary Magdalene: “What are you looking for?” (p. 38). How would you answer that question? What role does prayer play in your answer?
2. “Ultimately, prayer is about love” (p. 39). When were some of the times when you’ve most clearly known that God loves you?
3. When you “turn your eyes toward heaven” (p. 41), what do you see?
4. “Contemplative prayer is the answer to restlessness” (p. 43). How might this statement change your life?
5. Have you ever felt disillusioned with your prayer? What happened as a result of this?

6. Recall the Scripture reading in Session 1 (Luke 10:38-42). Is your life at this time more like Martha's or like Mary's? Do not judge your answer; both busyness and quiet listening have their place.

Are there any other questions that arose while reading this chapter? Reflect on these, or talk about them with your small group or someone close to you.

Prayer Practice

Contemplation is "a way of being present to what's really inside our own experience" (p. 44). During the next few days, try to focus, as often as you can, on being in the present moment. Truly taste your food as you eat; really listen to a friend as she talks to you; be aware of the sounds or the silence around you when you sit for a moment and pray.

Closing Prayer

God of all creation, you animate my being with your goodness and love. I praise you for your wondrous world and the generosity of your gifts to us. You are God of all; open my eyes to see you in everything. Amen.

Session 5

Growing to Maturity in Prayer

To begin, set the mood for reflection and prayer by finding a quiet place, lighting a candle, and/or playing a hymn or instrumental music in the background. Have a Bible and a copy of *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing* at hand.

Scripture

Read Genesis 32:24-29

Meditation

Close your eyes and remember you are in the presence of God. Recall a passage or phrase from the Scripture reading, then spend a few minutes silently reflecting on these words and what they mean in your life right now.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you reconcile the prevailing desire of our culture—to have everything now—with the promises of a God “who asks us to live in a lifelong patience” (p. 50)?
2. “It is no simple task being a human being” (p. 53). How does this relate to the Greek ideal of perfection versus the Hebrew ideal (pp. 7-8)? What does it mean for you, personally?
3. Which of the demons mentioned on pp. 54-55 is most troubling to you at this point in your life? How can prayer affect the way you deal with this demon?
4. “Real despair... [is] the belief that nothing new can happen to us” (p. 57). Have you ever found yourself feeling this way? If so, how did it affect you? What brought about a change?

5. When have you wrestled with God?
6. "God is our real mother" (p. 64). How might seeing God as both father and mother change your images of God? Do you relate more to one than to the other? Why?

Are there any other questions that arose while reading this chapter? Reflect on these, or talk about them with your small group or someone close to you.

Prayer Practice

As you pray this week, consider different images of God. Use a piece of artwork or a holy card as inspiration, if you'd like, or look through Scripture for other imagery. Most of all, listen to your heart as you imagine the many ways God appears to you.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, you are my rock and my salvation. Hear me when I cry to you, in sorrow and in joy, in celebration and in mourning, in darkness and in light. Guide me in your paths, and teach me the ways of your wisdom and truth. Amen.

Session 6

Listening to God's Heartbeat

To begin, set the mood for reflection and prayer by finding a quiet place, lighting a candle, and/or playing a hymn or instrumental music in the background. Have a Bible and a copy of *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing* at hand.

Scripture

Read John 13:20-26

Meditation

Close your eyes and remember you are in the presence of God. Recall a passage or phrase from the Scripture reading, then spend a few minutes silently reflecting on these words and what they mean in your life right now.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. "The ideal disciple is the one who is attuned to Christ's heartbeat" (p. 65). What does being a disciple of Christ—a Christian—mean to you? How might being "attuned to Christ's heartbeat" change this?
2. To be mild is not necessarily seen as an admirable trait in our culture. Yet John of the Cross says, "We will begin to remember the primordial touch of God when, through solitude, we empty our hearts of all that is not mild" (p. 66). Spend some time thinking about what this could mean on a practical basis, and discuss with another.
3. Returning to the Preface, Fr. Rolheiser notes: "We need to connect with God. We need prayer" (p. viii). How has your study through these six sessions helped your prayer? What would you still like to learn or do?

4. Also on p. viii, we read: “You have to show up for prayer and you have to show up regularly.” Are you ready to make that commitment? If you already have, how has this book helped in your practice? If you have not, how can you get to that point?
5. What deep longing in your heart do you want to bring to God in prayer? Are there any other questions that arose while reading this chapter? Reflect on these, or talk about them with your small group or someone close to you.

Prayer Practice

This week, take some time to explore the primordial place inside you where God first touched your spirit. Listen closely for God’s heartbeat, and bring it to the surface as you can. Feel the intimate knowledge and presence of Emmanuel, God with us, alive in your very being.

Closing Prayer

Lord, God, I stand before you as a microcosm of the earth itself, to give it voice. See in my openness, the world’s openness; in my infidelity, the world’s infidelity; in my sincerity, the world’s sincerity; in my hypocrisy, the world’s hypocrisy; in my generosity, the world’s generosity; in my selfishness, the world’s selfishness; in my attentiveness, the world’s attentiveness; in my distraction, the world’s distraction; in my desire to praise you, the world’s desire to praise you; and in my self-preoccupation, the world’s forgetfulness of you. For I am of the earth, a piece of earth, and the earth opens or closes to you through my body, my soul, and my voice.

What I hold up for you today is all that is in this world, both of joy and of suffering. I offer you the bread of the world’s achievements, even as I offer you the wine of its failure, the blood of all that’s crushed as those achievements take place. I offer you the powerful of our world, our rich, our famous, our athletes, our artists, our movie stars, our entrepreneurs, our young, our healthy, and

everything that's creative and bursting with life, even as I offer you those who are weak, feeble, aged, sick, dying, and victimized. I offer to you all the pagan beauties, pleasures, and joys of this life, even as I stand with you under the cross, affirming that the one who is excluded from earthly pleasure is the cornerstone of the community. I offer you the strong and arrogant, along with the weak and gentle of heart, asking you to bless both and to stretch my heart so that it can, like you, hold and bless everything that is. I offer you both the wonders and the pains of this world, your world. Amen.

OTHER BOOKS BY RONALD ROLHEISER, OMI

Against an Infinite Horizon: The Finger of God in Our Everyday Lives (New York: Crossroad, 2002)

Forgotten Among the Lilies: Learning to Love Beyond Our Fears (New York: Image, 2007)

The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality (New York: Doubleday, 1999)

Our One Great Act of Fidelity: Waiting for Christ in the Eucharist (New York: Image, 2011)

The Restless Heart: Finding Our Spiritual Home in Times of Loneliness (New York: Doubleday, 2004)

Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God (New York: Crossroad, 2005)