

PRAYER

“ They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ”



HOLYHABITS

MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP RESOURCES FOR CHURCHES

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PRAYER

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To order more copies of the Holy Habits resources, or to find out how to download pages for printing or projection on screen, please visit brfonline.org.uk/holy-habits.



Remember the context

This Holy Habit is set in the context of ten Holy Habits, and the ongoing life of your church and community.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the **prayers**. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42-47

A prayer for the faithful practice of Holy Habits

This prayer starts with a passage from Romans 5:4-5.

Endurance produces character, and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us...

Gracious and ever-loving God, we offer our lives to you.
Help us always to be open to your Spirit in our thoughts
and feelings and actions.

Support us as we seek to learn more about those habits of the Christian life
which, as we practise them, will form in us the character of Jesus
by establishing us in the way of faith, hope and love.

Amen

INTRODUCTION

Prayer is a foundational and transformative Holy Habit, a way of being, the breath of life. It reorientates us in right relationships with God, with others and the world. It is an antidote to the selfishness of sin.

There are many helpful ways of thinking about **Prayer**. One is by using the letters of ACTS:

Adoration: When did you last spend time: expressing your adoration of God just for the sake of it? Reorienting yourself in the orbit of God's love? Gazing upon and being transformed by divine holiness?

Confession: This can sometimes be rushed. It is tempting to focus on the repentance (the changing and moving on) without first dwelling in the place of contrition and sorrow.

Thanksgiving: Another transformational aspect of **Prayer**, which fosters humility as well as **Gladness and Generosity**. The simple practice of saying grace before a meal connects us with the goodness of God in creation, while the great thanksgiving prayers from many Communion services remind us of how much we have to be grateful for, most especially in the self-giving love of God seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Supplication: As we take time with adoration, confession and thanksgiving, we are reorientated to God's love and holiness. So, when we come to supplication (or intercession), we are able to pray in a way consistent with the teaching of Jesus for the fruits of God's kingdom to be seen and known in the lives of those for whom we pray.

There are two great biblical cries of **Prayer**: the cry of praise typified by the word 'Hallelujah', and the cry of lament captured in phrases such as 'How long?' God is shown to hear and respond to both cries. Be sure to explore this habit from both these perspectives, confident in the one to whom you pray, who holds and hears you as you do.

Reflections

Whenever Christians meet together, they pray. Sometimes the words are well loved and have been recited by the church for ages past. Sometimes the words are fresh and raw, gushing from the deep cries of people's hearts. On other occasions, **Prayer** is silent. Or **Prayer** may arise simply from the shared activity of people who love Jesus Christ 'living, working in our world'.

Prayer is a conversation with God; it is waiting on God – both in listening and serving. **Prayer** is sustaining, encouraging, nurturing, exciting and engaging. It is the lifeblood of the church.

As you explore the Holy Habit of **Prayer**, we hope churches will be encouraged to pray together, not just in corporate worship but perhaps in prayer meetings or small groups.

- How could the **Prayer** life of individuals be strengthened and developed?
- Could **Prayer** be used as a tool for mission?
- How/where else could **Prayer** be or become a regular feature of your church life?

And in the community of which you are a part:

- What does **Prayer** mean to people who are not in the church?
- How can the church be part of the community through its **Prayer**?
- Where is **Prayer** happening already in your local community, and how can you engage with that?

And when we are struggling to pray, or when prayers are not answered in the way we hope or expect, how can we support one another to wrestle with that before God in **Prayer**?



Resources particularly suitable for children and families



Resources particularly suitable for young people

CH4 Church Hymnary 4 (also known as Hymns of Glory Songs of Praise)

RS Rejoice and Sing

SoF Songs of Fellowship 6

StF Singing the Faith

Introduction to the theme

Start with some general questions to the congregation:

- How do you pray?
- Where do you pray?
- Do you do anything special with your hands or eyes?
- What words do you use?
- Does it matter what sort of things we pray about?

Then tell this story from 1 Samuel 1:

There's a story in the Bible about a woman called Hannah. She was very sad because she didn't have any children. She was upset because people teased her and said it was her fault. They boasted to her about their children.

One day Hannah went to the temple to pray. She was really upset and she cried as she prayed. Eli, the priest, saw her praying. He could see her lips moving but couldn't hear anything. Eli thought Hannah was drunk and so he told her off. Hannah explained how upset she was and told Eli that she was pouring her heart out to God. Then Eli understood and told her to go in peace.

Hannah's prayers were answered and sometime later she had a baby. Things don't always turn out the way we want them to when we pray to God. But Hannah knew that she could say anything to God and God would listen.

It doesn't matter if we're happy or sad, calm or cross; we can tell God exactly how life is and God will listen. The Psalms are full of songs and poems where people tell God exactly how they're feeling. Maybe you could try reading some of them if you don't know how to pray – you may just find one that says how it is for you.

But we also need to take time to listen to God when we pray and not do all the talking – just like we do when we're talking to our family or friends. Because sometimes when we pray God says 'Yes', and sometimes God says 'No', and sometimes God says 'Wait'; we need to listen because God knows what's best for us.

Finish by singing an appropriate hymn or song.

GROUP MATERIAL AND ACTIVITIES

Some of these small group materials are traditional Bible studies, some are more diverse session plans and others are short activities, reflections and discussions. Please choose materials appropriate to whatever group you are working with.

Creative acts of worship

Think about alternative ways to structure your acts of worship, which can provide an opportunity to find new ways of expressing yourselves in **Prayer**. For some churches, to be active in acts of worship can help spiritual truths sink in more easily than many words. For others, creativity might mean exploring liturgy or ancient practices.

Praying with the psalms of lament

Psalm 43

In prayer, all is not sweetness and light. The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom.

Eugene Peterson

The Psalms are a wonderful aid in **Prayer**, and give us language and words to speak to God in whatever state we find ourselves – whether in joy or grief, celebration or suffering. The Psalms formed the prayer book for Israel, as well as for Jesus and the early Christians. The monastic practice of praying through the Psalms each month reflects the central role they play in Christian spirituality.

While the book of Psalms includes a number of different types of poetry – including the psalm of praise and the psalm of trust – one form of psalm perhaps less widely used in **Prayer** today is the psalm of lament.

‘Psalms of lament’ refers to that cluster of psalms that focus on suffering and brokenness. Such psalms give voice to the pain of the human condition, the pain of loneliness, sickness, or abandonment – even abandonment by God. Often in our

spiritual life or in church, we fear to express our pain and distress at the way things are – but the psalms of lament give us words to do so.

The psalms of lament follow a fairly conventional structure, and include features such as a complaint, a petition for help and an assurance of being heard, and usually end with an expression of trust in God. Some psalms also include curses on enemies.

Other examples of psalms of lament include Psalms 12, 17, 22, 42, and 88.

There are a number of ways to pray such psalms:

Personalising the psalm

You might ‘personalise’ the psalm in **Prayer**, using your own words to express the emotions it expresses. This could involve writing your own paraphrase of the psalm or a prayer based upon it.

Responding to the psalm

Read each line of the psalm and allow it to prompt your own prayers of response. Psalms of lament might encourage prayers of pain, confession, or petition for God’s help.

Praying for others

Psalms of lament don’t always seem that relevant to our situation, particularly if life is going well. At such times, it can be helpful to allow the words of the psalm to shape your **Prayer** for others. The psalms of lament give voice to those who are in situations of suffering or despair, and allow you to bring their needs before God in **Prayer**.

For further reading on this subject, you may want to explore:

- Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Fortress Press, 2002)
- Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God* (Marshall Pickering, 1996)
- Tom Wright, *Finding God in the Psalms: Sing, pray, live* (SPCK, 2014).

ARTS AND MEDIA

There are many films and books containing scenes about **Prayer** which could be used as an illustration in worship. However, it is suggested that the following films and books are watched or read in their entirety and followed by a discussion to go deeper into the topic of **Prayer**.

Films

12 Years a Slave (15, 2013, 2h14m)

A very powerful film in which the practices of **Prayer** (spoken and sung) help to maintain Solomon Northrup's faith, hope and dignity in the face of the brutality of the slave trade. Based on a book of the same name.

- Can we pray or work generously for those who treat us badly? If so, how?



Bruce Almighty (12A, 2003, 1h41m)

A comedy in which the eponymous Bruce, who spends a lot of time complaining about God, is given almighty powers to teach him how difficult it is to run the world. In particular, he has to grapple with how to answer everybody's prayers.

- If you had God's powers, how would you answer **Prayer**? Would you want to say yes to everybody?

- Can all of our prayers really be answered?
- How does Bruce's experience of being God change his understanding of **Prayer**? What important questions does God ask of Bruce?
- Did this film challenge you in any way about your own **Prayer** life?

Facing the Giants (PG, 2006, 1h51m)

The story of an American high-school sports coach who turns to God in his hour of need to find that his prayers are answered in extraordinary ways.

This film comes from a particular theological perspective on the way God responds to **Prayer**, which may be troublesome for some. If you plan to use this film, make sure you have watched it in advance and are prepared to respond to the issues it may raise.

- How do you respond to the film's portrayal of **Prayer**?

Into Great Silence (U, 2005, 2h49m)

A slow and mesmerising meditation on the life of a silent monastic community, this film takes an understanding of **Prayer** to another level.

This film is something quite different, and wouldn't (for instance) be suitable for a general film night – make sure you watch it first if you intend to use it.

- The film describes a monastic community, a long way from most of our experience. What can we take from the spirituality of the monks and their way of life that can help us in our **Prayer** (and in living)?
- How important is a regular pattern of **Prayer**?

The Way (12A, 2010, 2h3min)

The story of a reluctant pilgrim finding community on the road and the importance of **Prayer** as doing something even though you are not sure what the outcome might be.

- With whom do you have a sense of community outside the church?
- How might you pray for, or with, those you meet?

Books: fiction

Are there people in your church or local community who would like to discuss some of these books at a book club? Guidance on how to form these is widely available online, and you could also ask denominational training officers for help.

😊 **Ballet Shoes**

Noel Streatfield (Puffin, 1972)

The story of three girls and their determination to achieve their dreams.

- In chapter 3, the girls make a vow with each other 'like at christenings'. In chapter 12, they make the vow again and end it with 'Amen'. Is this **Prayer**? If so, what it makes it **Prayer** – and if not, why not?
- In the book, the girls work hard to achieve their dreams. How are we called to be the answer to our prayers?

Chasing Francis

Ian Morgan Cron (Zondervan, 2013)

A great read to help people think about faith, discipleship, spirituality, **Prayer** – the lot, really.

- What form of pilgrimage might you undertake?

HOLY HABITS is an initiative to nurture Christian discipleship. It explores Luke’s model of church found in Acts 2:42–47, identifies ten habits and encourages the development of a way of life formed by them. These resources, which include an introductory guide, have been developed to help churches explore the habits in a range of contexts and live them out in whole-life, missional discipleship.

Biblical Teaching
 Fellowship
 Breaking Bread
 Prayer
 Sharing Resources

Serving
 Eating Together
 Gladness and Generosity
 Worship
 Making More Disciples



Edited by Andrew Roberts, Neil Johnson and Tom Milton



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