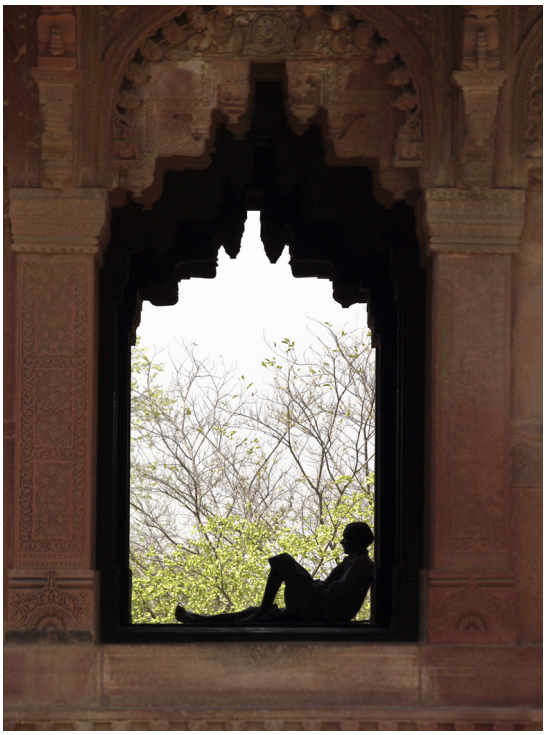
SOME SIMPLE PRAYER PRACTICES



“Be still,and know that I am God”

Psalm 46:10

So...you are thirsty for more of God? You are in good company! You join millions of those who have gone before you over the centuries, who have cried out with the Psalmist...

"O God, You are my God; earnestly I seek You.
My soul thirsts for You; my body longs for You
in a dry and weary land where there is no water."
Psalm 63:1

In the busyness of our daily lives, God is calling...wooing us with His matchless love, wanting to draw us closer and closer to Him until our hearts are satisfied with nothing less than Him.

"Be still
and know
that I am God."
Psalm 46:10

Those who have gone before us have discovered simple practices of prayer that have helped them to find that place of stillness and surrender in which one can grow in experiencing and living from the presence and love of God.

This booklet describes some of these simple prayer practices. May you be blessed as you earnestly seek Him!

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PRAYER OF PRESENCE

Find a position that allows you to be relaxed and alert. It helps to have your neck and spine aligned. Close your eyes and breathe deeply several times. Consciously release any muscle tension you become aware of. Breathe in peace, breathe out tension.

Relax your mind. If particular thoughts keep returning, gather them up and give them to God to hold for you during this time. You can take them back later if you want.

Turn your attention to God's presence. Let yourself be fully aware of God's love that always surrounds you. Rest and soak up His love for you. Here are some suggestions for how you might do this, or feel free to find something else that works for you:

1. Let God's presence fill your consciousness, and simply rest in His presence-just as you might with someone you love dearly and feel no need to speak to, just to be with.

2. Let yourself be like a child cradled in the lap of a wonderful parent or grandparent.

3. Imagine yourself being gently supported in an ocean of love, or enfolded in a peaceful warmth.

4. Focus on the Christ candle, allowing it to remind you of His presence with you right now.

Close your prayer time by thanking God for His presence and love.

From "Soul Feast" (pages 46-47), by Marjorie Thompson.

QUIETING PRAYER

"Let there be a place somewhere in which you can breathe naturally, quietly, and not have to take your breaths in continuous short gasps. A place where your mind can be idle, and forget its concerns, descend into silence, and worship the Father in secret."
Thomas Merton

Begin by asking God to teach you how to still and quiet your soul. Remember that this will take time and practice. Do not strive or fall into self-effort, for your part is to simply open yourself to Him and to the work of His Holy Spirit in you.

For now, simply ask Him to bless you, protect you, guide you...as you spend this time with Him. Know that it is His good pleasure to help you learn to draw near to Him!

Find a position that allows you to be relaxed and alert. It helps to have your neck and spine aligned. Close your eyes and breathe deeply several times. Consciously release any muscle tension you become aware of. Breathe in peace, breathe out tension.

Relax your mind. When thoughts call for your attention, see if you can find a way to gently let go of them, releasing them to God. Turn your attention to God's presence. Let yourself be fully aware of God's love that always surrounds you. Rest and soak up His love for you.

It may help to think of or visualize an image. *Here are some suggestions or you can use one of your own:*

1. Water that has been stirred up... allowing it to settle and become still.
2. A young child simply resting against their parent.
3. Being with someone you love dearly and feel no need to speak to, just to be with...loving them and receiving their love without words.

Close your prayer time by thanking God for His presence and love.

"The only one who can teach me to find God
is God Himself, alone."
Thomas Merton

CENTERING PRAYER

For a little while give your time to God, and rest in Him for a little.
Enter the inner chamber of your mind,
shut out all things save God,
and having barred the door of your chamber, say to Him,
"Thy face, O Lord, will I seek."
(St. Anselm of Canterbury)

CHOOSING YOUR "SACRED WORD":

What special words have power to lift your eyes to God and your heart to the Spirit? In centering prayer, we use a single word to focus on God and prepare ourselves for the gift of God's presence.

Choose a sacred word that represents your desire for God or God's yearning for you. A simple word is best, such as *Jesus, Lord, God, Father, Spirit, love, peace or beloved.* Choose ONE word, not a phrase.

PREPARING FOR CENTERING PRAYER:

Begin by asking the Lord to teach you how to still and quiet your soul. Remember that this will take time and practice. Do not strive or fall into self-effort, for your part is to simply open yourself to Him and to the work of His Holy Spirit in you.

For now, simply ask Him to bless you, protect you, guide you...as you spend this time with Him. Know that it is His good pleasure to help you learn to draw near to Him!

Find a position that allows you to be relaxed and alert. It helps to have your neck and spine aligned. Close your eyes and breathe deeply several times. Consciously release any muscle tension you become aware of. Breathe in peace, breathe out tension.

CENTERING PRAYER:

Turn your attention to God's presence. Let yourself be fully aware of God's love that always surrounds you.

As you become relaxed, silently and gently offer your sacred word to God as a sign of your desire for and consent to God's presence and action within you. As you become aware of other thoughts, memories, feelings or images, instead of fighting them, gently return to your sacred word.

Remain in this state of rest and receptivity to God for 10 minutes or so. End with the Lord's Prayer or some other prayer from your heart.

Close your prayer time by thanking God for His presence and love.

"This is all He asks of you: that you live and respond to His grace in the here and now."
St. Francis de Sales

"The only one who can teach me to find God is God Himself, alone."
Thomas Merton

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(Much of this material is taken from the participants manual for "Companions in Christ", published by Upper Room Ministries, and from "Soul Feast" by Marjorie Thompson)

PRAYERS OF THE HEART

"Nothing could be of more value in our crowded lives than to take five minutes from our day to stop, breathe deeply and think of God."
Ettie Hillesum

There is a long history of Christian prayer that aims to move us "from HEAD to HEART". Prayers of the heart are typified by short phrases. They are repeated first on the lips and then in the mind, until they take on a life of their own deep within us. When such prayers become embedded in our life awareness and daily activity, they have truly become "heart prayers". Repeated prayers tend to deepen and expand in meaning as they are used in various contexts of life. Over time, the repetition creates a space in which words fall away and we become more aware of the Presence they point to.

A. The Jesus Prayer

This is the oldest of the prayers of the heart, in place as early as the fourth century. It combines the prayer of the tax collector from Luke 18:13 ("God, be merciful to me, a sinner") with the earliest confession of the Christian church ("Jesus is Lord").

The long form is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The short form is "Lord, have mercy". Consistent use of this prayer has been, for many, a path to the contemplation of Christ and communion with the risen Lord.

B. Breath Prayer

This is a contemporary version of the Jesus Prayer. It is called the "breath prayer" because the words for breath and spirit are the same in Hebrew and the use of this kind of prayer over time helps us experience what it means for the Spirit to pray in us (Romans 8:26-27).

It is also a short prayer that can be said or thought in a single breath, and is especially easy to learn and practice. It is suggested that you find your own (breath) prayer of the heart by following the directions on the other side of this handout.

Examples: Holy Spirit, fill me.
Father, show me Your love.
Give me strength, O Christ.

C. Scripture/Hymn Prayers

These can be prayed in the same way as breath prayers. Some have committed to memory a few verses of Scripture that are particularly precious. We turn to them in times of special need or irrepressible joy. Also, we can also find phrases from hymns, worship choruses and other spiritual songs that are meaningful to us.

Examples: My soul magnifies the Lord!
Be still and know that I am God.
Create in me a clean heart, O God.
Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.

Suggestions for finding your own prayer of the heart (from Ron DelBene, an Episcopal priest who developed this method from the older tradition):

1. Visualize Jesus standing before you, asking you: "__(your name)__ , what do you want Me to do for you?" Let your response surface from deep within. If more than one thing comes to mind, identify the root desire beneath all the others.

2. Next, identify how you normally address God in prayer: Lord, Jesus, Holy One, Living Spirit, Eternal God, Father, etc.

3. Combine your desire with your name for God in a single short phrase that flows easily in your mind. You may need to experiment with phrasing to find a comfortable rhythm.

4. Sit quietly and repeat the phrase gently in your mind for several minutes. Take a walk, repeating your prayer while you move. Note how the prayer shapes your perceptions. You can carry this prayer with you through the day. It fits well with many solitary activities from common household chores and routine tasks to standing in line and sitting in traffic jams! It is a good companion for rhythmic exercise such as walking, jogging, or swimming as well.

All this material is taken from the book "Soul Feast",
by Marjorie J. Thompson.

"The time of business is not different from the time of prayer.
In the noise and clatter of my kitchen,
I possess God as tranquilly as if I were upon my knees..."
Brother Lawrence

SPIRITUAL READING (Lectio Divina)

"Read with a vulnerable heart. Expect to be blessed in the reading.
Read as one awake, one waiting for the Beloved.
Read with reverence." Macrina Wiederkehr

Spiritual reading is reflective and prayerful. It is concerned not with speed or volume but with depth and receptivity. That is because the purpose of spiritual reading is to open ourselves to how God may be speaking to us in and through any particular passage. We are seeking not merely *information* but *formation*.

Spiritual reading is a meditative approach to the written word. It requires unhurried time and an open heart. If the purpose of our reading is to be addressed by God, we will need to practice attentive listening and a willingness to respond to what we hear. The attitude suffusing spiritual reading is that of the boy Samuel: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." (I Samuel 3:10).

The art of spiritual reading as a reflective assimilation of God's Word reaches straight back into the Jewish tradition of meditation: "Happy are those...(whose) delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law they meditate day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2).

Its practice in the Christian church was refined and given special weight by Saint Benedict in the sixth century. In Benedictine tradition, spiritual reading is referred to by its Latin title, *Lectio Divina*. Few Protestants are aware that figures like the great Reformer John Calvin and the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter advocated a method of reflective meditation with scripture that is directly derived from Benedictine practice.

There are four basic phases in the classic practice of spiritual reading, termed in Latin: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio.* A quick overview:
1. Lectio-literally means “reading”, as if you have a love letter in hand, reading each sentence as if for the first time, expecting that God will address you with a direct and personal message.
2. Meditatio-translates “meditation”, which engages us with the text at the level of the “heart” (where memory, experience, thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, intuition, and intentions are joined).
3. Oratio-refers to prayer that naturally flows out of our meditation, our first response to what we have heard and assimilated in the first two phases of spiritual reading. This is the direct cry of the heart to God that rises when we have heard ourselves personally addressed through the Word.
4. Contemplatio-contemplation, which essentially is rest in God’s presence, allowing ourselves simply to be.

These phases represent a general and often natural progression, but you may experience a weaving back and forth as the Spirit moves you. >

Instructions for spiritual reading:

A discipline of this sort takes unhurried time. A minimum of half an hour is suggested, although a full hour is often more satisfying and fruitful. Give God the best time of your day, not the dregs. Take this into consideration in choosing the time you give to God. Choose a place that affords you solitude and reasonable quiet if at all possible. Be fully available to God. Choose a passage of Scripture-not longer than a few verses.

Begin by reaffirming that the purpose of this reading is to let yourself be addressed by the living God. Remind yourself of God’s presence with you, here and now, whether you sense it or not...trust that the Holy One is attending to you. Offer your gratitude, and ask for the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit in your reading.

Lectio: Turn to the passage; begin to read silently and slowly, pausing between phrases and sentences. (For some, silent reading allows the mind to wander, so reading aloud or whispering is preferable). Let the words echo and resonate in your mind; allow meanings to sink in, associations to arise; images to surface. If a word or phrase seems especially significant to you, remain with it, turning it over in your mind and heart. When the sense of immediacy faces, move on to another verse. If it remains meaningful for you, stay with it. Here is a word meant for your ears. Be content to listen simply and openly, like a child listening to a story.

Meditatio: Once you have heard a "word" that seems meant for you, start ruminating on it. Why is this a word for you? What is it about your life right now that needs to hear this word? How is God catching your attention? What does God seem to be saying to you through this word?

Oratio: Let your prayer emerge from your encounter with this text. How do you find yourself praying for your own need? How does this word move you to pray for others? Allow your prayer to flow spontaneously from the heart, expressing as fully as you can what surfaces out of your listening.

Contemplatio: Release all your thoughts, feelings, and intentions to God. There is no further need to listen, reflect, imagine, or respond. There is simply an invitation to return to a place of rest near the heart of God where you may be at peace. God sustains you with love every moment of your life. Delight in this gift, take comfort and joy in it!

When you emerge from your contemplation, find a word, image or phrase that carries the core message you have received. Take this with you into your daily activities and relationships. Let your reflection and prayer continue inwardly as new experiences deepen the word you heard in your spiritual reading.

From "Soul Feast" by Marjorie Thompson (chapter two)

Praying Backward (The Examen): Developing a Conscious Awareness of God's Presence

Pray for Light

Since we are not simply daydreaming or reminiscing but rather looking for some sense of how the Spirit of God is leading us, it only makes sense to pray for some illumination. The goal is not simply memory but graced understanding.

Review the day in thanksgiving

Gratitude is the foundation of our whole relationship with God. Each of us loves to receive beautiful gifts and that is what the last 24 hours contain – gifts of existence, work, relationships, food, challenges. So use whatever cues help you to walk through the day from the moment of wakening – even the dreams you recall up on awakening. Walk through the past hours, from hour to hour, from place to place, task to task, person to person, thanking the Lord for every gift you encounter.

Review the images and feelings that surface in the replay of the day

What particular moment do you "see" in you mind's eye? What catches your attention or makes you stop to look again? And what feelings, positive and negative, the painful and the pleasing does this experience evoke in you? Pay attention to any image or story and all of the feelings it evokes in you as you relive this moment or time. If it just brings bewilderment or puzzlement it may be that something new is unfolding or you are resisting something that God is trying to reveal in your

experience. Simply pray for greater illumination and clarity and trust God to reveal this to you.

Chose a moment or feeling and talk to God about this

Express spontaneously the prayer that surfaces as you attend to the source of the feeling – praise, petition, conviction, a cry for help, a longing for healing, a lament about a difficulty. Do not censor this or try to protect God (or yourself) from the strong feelings or reaction. Give thanks for the moments when you were aware of the gift of God's presence. If you are aware of your own sin and self-centeredness, name this and receive forgiveness, knowing that God is always eager to forgive.

Close this prayer with the Lord's Prayer.

This brings the prayer home and grounds it in Biblical soil.

An adaptation of the examen by Dennis Hamm, SJ from "Rummaging for God: Praying Backward Through Your Day," America: May 14, 1994, pp. 22-24.