

bible studies about prayer

Jesus and the church at prayer

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

AIM

Jesus and the church at prayer invites a conversation about prayer. It draws on everyone's own experience of prayer (**whatever** it may be) to help with a shared investigation of stories about praying in Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. We hope this will help everyone in your group, to:

- **talk together about prayer** by interacting with ideas from Luke's Gospel and Acts
- **make connections** between the biblical stories and your own experience of prayer
- find fresh **vision** for the role prayer might play in your lives and your church

INTRODUCTION

This material is part of the toolkit for Vision4Life Prayer Year: it's a Bible study (or more than one depending on the time available to you), but it's about prayer. It offers an overview of the part prayer plays in the life of Jesus and the early church, as presented in 'Luke's Gospel' and 'The Acts of the Apostles'. Using these Bible materials interpreted through the life experiences of your group, we hope you will be able to start to build your own answers to the key question, "**Why should we pray?**".

THINGS TO ARRANGE LOCALLY...

Here's a brief list of things you will need to arrange locally to make this study happen:

advertising & recruitment – *how can you attract as many participants as possible?*

timing & recurrence – *what arrangements will allow maximum access & involvement?*

venue, atmosphere & catering – *what will best enable good conversations?*

prayer & worship – *what sort of worship, if any, will best fit with this conversation?*

leading & enabling – *who will enable sessions (a team of two might be better than one)?*

presentation & paper – *should you use support handouts or Bibles or keep it all spoken?*

- *where some might be awkward about reading, plan for oral-only involvement*
- *where Bible-reading is an established pattern use Bible handouts or Bibles*

follow-up – *what might the next step be (think about this beforehand)?*

bible studies about prayer

Jesus and the church at prayer

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

OUTLINE STRUCTURE

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Our initial reactions - *sharing our own first responses to talking about prayer*
3. Sharing the stories of prayer from Luke's Gospel and Acts
4. Contacts and chasms – *what we can relate to; what we can't*
5. Trying to see why Jesus prayed alone
6. Making connections for individual prayer today
7. Trying to see why the early church prayed together
8. Making connections for praying together today
9. Deciding how that helps us to live now
10. *(optional)* Rounding it off with a song

1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

Your group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may well include prayer or worship or some sort of catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context. If people might not know each other, you ought to include a time of introductions. Basically, do anything that helps **your** group to be ready to share a conversation about prayer...

2. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS – *sharing our own first responses to talking about prayer*

Your group considers how everyone feels about sharing a conversation about prayer.

- What makes us **glad** to be talking about prayer?
- What makes us **wary** of talking about prayer?
- Are there any **ground rules** we could agree that would make it feel safer?

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. The group may need to agree some ground rules (especially about the confidentiality of things discussed in the group) before moving on.

bible studies about prayer

Jesus and the church at prayer

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

3. SHARING THE STORIES OF PRAYER FROM LUKE'S GOSPEL AND ACTS

The conversation continues by hearing or sharing stories from Luke's Gospel that give us some idea of the role which prayer played in the life and ministry of Jesus. This is followed by hearing or sharing stories from the book of Acts that help us see the role which praying together played in the life of the early church.

A summary of the stories that tell us about **Jesus praying in Luke's Gospel** can be found on **page 7** below. A summary of the stories that tell us about **the church praying in Acts** can be found on **page 8** below.

How these materials are presented will depend on local circumstances and preferences, local group enablers will need to decide on one of the following methods:

- The summaries on **pages 7 & 8** are used as group handouts to present the material
- The stories are told by one or more people who have prepared them for telling
- The whole group is invited to re-construct the stories from various rememberings
- People read the relevant passages straight from the Bible, while others follow
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

4. CONTACTS AND CHASMS – *what we can relate to; what we can't*

This is an invitation to the group to give their first responses to the Bible materials that have been shared. The group is offered two things to think about:

- **contacts** – what can we relate to in these Bible materials on prayer?
- **chasms** – what feels so different from our experience that we can't relate to it?

Once again, this can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. It would be good to record the offered 'contacts' and 'chasms' in some way – e.g. writing comments up on a flip chart or wall poster.

5. TRYING TO SEE WHY JESUS PRAYED ALONE

Either working as a whole group, or in sub-groups, everyone is invited to focus on what we have shared of the role of personal prayer in the life and ministry of Jesus and, using their own awareness of life and its pressures and what they know of Jesus' circumstances, try to answer this question, then share and record their answers:

- **Why did Jesus pray?**
 - *teasing this out... what, so far as we can tell, drove Jesus to prayer? what did he hope to achieve by prayer? What do we think prayer did for Jesus? Why did he pray when Luke tells us he did?*

bible studies about prayer

Jesus and the church at prayer

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

6. MAKING CONNECTIONS for individual prayer today

Remembering the 'contacts' and the 'chasms' we've already listed, can we make any connections between 'Why Jesus prayed' and why and when any one of us might want to pray? Are we finding anything that might help to bridge any of our earlier 'chasms'?

7. TRYING TO SEE WHY THE EARLY CHURCH PRAYED TOGETHER

Either working as a whole group, or in sub-groups, everyone is invited to focus on what we have shared of the role of shared prayer in the developing life of the first believing communities and, using their own awareness of life and its pressures and what they know of the circumstances of the first churches, try to answer this question, then share and record their answers:

- **Why did these first believing communities pray together?**
 - *teasing this out... what, so far as we can tell, drove the church to prayer? what did they hope to achieve by prayer? What, might they have thought prayer would do for them and their mission? Why did they pray together? What difference did their praying make?*

8. MAKING CONNECTIONS for praying together today

Remembering the 'contacts' and the 'chasms' we've already listed, can we make any connections between 'Why the first believing communities prayed together' and why and when we might want to pray together as a community? Are we finding anything that might help to bridge any of our earlier 'chasms'?

9. DECIDING HOW THAT HELPS US TO LIVE NOW

The group needs to stop and see where it has reached. People may not all be in the same place. Some may feel they have gained fresh insights, others not. There may be a number of unbridged or only partially-bridged chasms. These need to be remembered and recorded for future discussion, along with any other questions that seem to cry out for more work. But helpful ideas that seem to have developed, especially if they seem to be shared, should be noted too, so that they can be shared with others.

Consider two further questions:

- **What have we shared that speaks to us today?**
- **What are we going to do differently now?**

Jesus and the church at prayer

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

10. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG *(optional)*

PRACTISING PRAYER

based on references to prayer in Luke & Acts tune: You shall go out with joy, Rejoice & Sing no.415

1. He'd find a time alone, a snatch'd renewal zone
for his sense that through it all his God would be with him;
through each desert waste, in each too-crowded place
where demands would suck him dry.
So, the tears and the cries of grief and pain
that he'd share with his God were not in vain
for they healed as they hurt, proving once again -
there's help for those who pray.
2. Hid in their secret place, they gathered face to face
to explore their hopes and fears and seek God together;
with their Jesus gone, could they still journey on,
in his name share hope and joy?
Yet the Spirit that found them in their need
gave them strength to proclaim and intercede,
let them share hope and joy through word and deed -
there's help for those who pray.
3. Wherever we may be, whatever we may see,
though life's battle all around seems tragic and senseless;
though we face despair, still this one hope is there -
that our God will hear our pray'r.
If, like Jesus, we bring our hurt to You,
and together seek help to see us through,
we will prove, yet again, what You can do -
there's help for those who pray.

John M. Campbell

bible studies about prayer



Jesus and the church at prayer

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

WHAT NEXT?

If your group found this study helpful, they may wish to try some of the other Prayer Year toolkit resources available from the Vision4Life website. Do keep checking the website as more and more materials should be appearing all through the Vision4Life Prayer Year.

see the following two pages for materials to help your group begin this conversation...

- **Jesus praying in Luke's Gospel**
- **The church praying together in Acts**

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

part one - Jesus praying in Luke's Gospel

All the Gospels speak of Jesus praying, but Luke draws our attention to Jesus at prayer more often. See what your group makes of any or all of these ten references by Luke...

Luke 3.22 - Jesus' baptism and blessing – Luke's account of Jesus' baptism includes a note that Jesus was praying when the affirming voice spoke from the heavens and the Spirit came down like a dove. Why would Luke want to add that detail?

Luke 4.1-13 – Jesus and the wilderness fasting – As with other Gospels, Luke tells of Jesus being driven by the Spirit to be tested in the wilderness and of his fasting there for forty days. Though the word 'prayer' is not mentioned, might this represent a time of fasting and prayer – even an extended period of 'extreme praying' ? Why would Jesus do that, and why at this particular time?

Luke 5.16 – Jesus and the habit of private prayer – In a summary about Jesus' Galilean ministry Luke adds a comment that Jesus would (often - NIV) withdraw into the wilderness to pray. This is prayer as part of Jesus' pattern of life in ministry. How did that work?

Luke 6.12 – Jesus preparing to choose 12 disciples – before his account of Jesus choosing twelve particular followers to be with him and be sent out on mission, Luke tells us that Jesus spent the whole night in prayer. Why might Jesus do that?

Luke 9.18 – Jesus and the big question – Luke tells us that when Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, and Peter said he was 'God's Messiah (or anointed one)' it was in the midst of a time when Jesus was praying alone. Why would Luke want us to know that?

Luke 9.28 – Jesus praying on the mountain – Luke tells us that when Jesus went up the mountain of transfiguration with Peter and James and John, they went up the mountain to pray. Does that add anything to the story of the transfiguration?

Luke 22.32 – Jesus had prayed for Peter – When warning Peter of his impending denial, Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, tells us that he has prayed for Peter, that Peter would be able to turn again and be strong for the others after he had failed. What does this add to our picture of Jesus, his praying and his care for his followers?

Luke 22.40-46 – Jesus in Gethsemane – This is the classic Gospel account of Jesus praying in the most desperate of situations and somehow finding through prayer the strength to continue on the way of the cross. What do we learn about prayer from watching here?

Luke 23.34&46 – Jesus prays on the cross – Luke replaces Jesus' final cry of dereliction on the cross (*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*) with a gentler prayer – 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'. Either way, Jesus' last words before his death are addressed to God in prayer. What does this add to our picture of prayer in Gethsemane?

Luke 24.30 – The risen Jesus blesses the bread – In the climax of his resurrection-day story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke tells us that the two disciples suddenly realise who their companion is when Jesus prays at their shared evening meal. This is a first instance of shared praying with the risen Jesus. What does it say to us about prayer?

Jesus and the church at prayer

initial explorations in Luke's Gospel and Acts

In Luke's Gospel there are also three parables told by Jesus about prayer. See if your group can recall any of these stories and work out what they might tell us about praying...

Luke 11.5-8 – The parable of the friend at midnight – even if we don't seem to get an obvious, positive response (when we pray) perseverance may still bring a response. Does this connect with our experience?

Luke 18.1-8 – The parable of the unjust judge – another story urging persistence in prayer and, presumably, warning against giving up too easily when no response is evident. Is it at all reassuring that Jesus feels the need to say this?

Luke 18.9-14 – The parable of the Pharisee and the publican – a sharp challenge to those who would pray about the importance of the right attitude. How does that translate today?

part two – the church praying together in Acts

If Luke's Gospel highlights the personal prayer practice of Jesus, then the companion volume we know as 'Acts of the Apostles' gives some vivid accounts of communities of Jesus' followers praying together. See what your group makes of the following incidents and ideas drawn from the various references to prayer in Acts...

Acts 1.14 & 2.42 – believers in constant prayer together – both before and after Pentecost the Jerusalem believers are pictured as constantly devoting themselves to shared times of prayer – strength for survival in a bewildering new situation? Can we connect?

Acts 1.24; 13.2-3; 14.23 – believers appointing apostles, missionaries and elders – when they chose a new apostle (to replace Judas), when they set Saul and Barnabas aside to be missionaries of the fellowship in Antioch and when they appointed elders to lead a number of infant churches, we read that they did so when the fellowship gathered for prayer, or for prayer and fasting. What is this praying all about?

Acts 2.1 & 4.31 – believers praying together till the Spirit comes – On Pentecost 'all' the believers in Jerusalem were gathered together (possibly for prayer), another time we read of them gathered and praying – both times the Holy Spirit comes upon them powerfully to enable and encourage. How does this relate to our experience of praying together today?

Acts 12.5 & 12 – believers interceding – when Peter is imprisoned the believers meet to pray fervently for him, yet when he appears at the door they are struggling to believe he is truly there. Can we connect with this? What do we expect when we pray for those in need?

Acts 20.36 – believers praying before parting – Before Paul leaves the church elders of Ephesus, with no assurance of a return, they all pray together. What is this prayer doing?