

The Possibility of Prayer — Lent Guide

Lent is an intentional season where Christians seek to reorient what they love and how they seek love out. Our culture teaches us to seek love by merely following our desires and resisting delayed gratification. *Be who you are by reaching for what you want.* Lent resists this and seeks to reorient how we seek out love and reform *what* we love.

Lent is six weeks, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on Holy Saturday (some traditions end on Maundy Thursday), the day before Easter. It's a season of preparation for Easter joy, of dying to our self and sin in order to experience the resurrection life of Christ in the Spirit! It is meant to stir longings and awaken deep desires for Jesus. Surely, these things are meant to be done daily, not just six weeks out of the year. But Lent invites us into a season of unique intentionality and intensity. It also calls us to resist a version of Christian individualism and join a broader corporate body of Christians all pressing into the same reality and goal.

This is a guide that uses the prayer disciplines in *The Possibility of Prayer* as a pathway through the reorienting season of Lent. This is an encouragement to practice prayer as you are reading and learning *about* prayer. The practice of prayer consists of primary rhythms (communion, meditation, and solitude), and secondary rhythms (Sabbath resting, fasting, and corporate worship). The word *secondary* shouldn't communicate "optional" or even "supplemental." Primary and secondary rhythms of prayer depend on one another for vibrancy and life. Our personal times of communion, meditation, and solitude are enhanced by the regular rhythms of Sabbath rest, fasting, and corporate worship, and our rhythms of Sabbath rest, fasting, and corporate worship are deepened by our personal habits of communion, meditation, and solitude. What God has joined together, let no human put asunder!

Each week of Lent, we'll be practicing a different rhythm of prayer. But not every rhythm is created equal. Some are more challenging than others. You will need to grow into some, while others will come easier. So take some stock of yourself and consider your capacity. Nobody runs a marathon on day one of their training. Nevertheless, in training, we press into things that challenge our limitations. Prayer rhythms work the same way. This guide leads us to press into those limitations with the intentionality and intensity that Lent invites. Maybe in this season, God is inviting you to press into these rhythms every day or maybe an appropriate challenge of your limitations is committing to three days a week of focused prayer.

Finally, spiritual rhythms are always best done in community. Find a friend or a small group of people who will participate and encourage you along the way.

Week 1 — Practicing Communion

Communion emphasizes the relational side of prayer (see chapter 7). Ronald Rohlheiser describes it as “getting close enough to God to hear him say ‘I love you.’” In communion, we are seeking to love and be loved; to know and be known. Communion is a transformative habit, but personal transformation cannot be the ultimate goal, or it will never be transformative. God must never merely be an enhancement to our self-improvement plan or a ticket to a better life. *He is* Life. God must be the goal, the end, the prize. Communion is coming to God for the sake of God: for his beauty, his love, his presence, his joy. But transformation slips in through the back door and comes at us sideways. We are changed indirectly by our enjoyment of him.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. What do you imagine God thinks of you? Disappointed? Indifferent? Can you imagine God as the Father welcoming you into communion like the father of the prodigal son welcoming the prodigal home (Luke 15)?
2. How would you describe your relationship with God?
3. What are you hoping will change with your relationship with God? What are you excited about?

The Practice:

1. As you come to prayer and Bible reading, begin by saying a short prayer that can sound like this, “Father, help me to be present to you as I know you are present to me. Help me to listen as you share your heart and give me the desire to share my heart.”
2. As you are reading your Bible passage, take time to listen to what God is saying to you personally. Imagine God the Father is speaking, then God the Son, then God the Spirit. If you read Deuteronomy 31:8, “The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (NIV), ask yourself, how might the Father speak that same truth to me in order to assure me of his fatherly love? How might the Son, my brother, advocate, and friend, speak that truth to me? What might the Spirit, the counselor, convicter, and comforter say (for help, read pages 46-49)?
3. As you end your reading and prayers, try to collect and see all that God has said, and then say to the Lord, “Thank you.”

Week 2 — Practicing Meditation

Meditation on Scripture is the work that minimizes the gap between what we *know* about God and ourselves and how we actually *live* (see chapter 8). That work often feels slow and even hidden. And because of that we often resist it. We want a formula or a combination to bring immediate or obvious success and results. But the Bible calls us to ignore quick fixes. Meditating on Scripture puts us in the most concentrated path of that deep work. It's never formulaic. The Psalms are often the fruit of David or some other author meditating slowly on the stories or promises of Scripture. Richard Baxter said that meditation is to read the Bible in such a way as to make your heart hot. It turns your Bible readings into a burning bush.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. Do you find reading Scripture slowly difficult? If so, why?
2. How could slowing down enrich your experience of reading God's Word?
3. Can you remember a specific time when reading a Bible passage helped you sense the presence of God, increased your faith, or provoked you to worship?

The Practice:

1. Prepare times during your week to sit with Scripture for 25 minutes to an hour each time.
2. As you read a passage in Scripture, read slowly, circling, underlining, or writing down in a journal words or phrases that stick out to you. Why do they stick out? What do you think God wants you to see or learn?
3. What do these words or phrases say about God? How does it lead you to worship? What does it say about you? What sins or attitudes are you led to repent of? What promises are you encouraged to remember and boast in?
4. As you look over what you've seen and written down, pray it all back to God. Praise him for what this passage reveals about him. Repent of sins and ask for forgiveness. Thank him for promises you've been reminded of and ask for help to trust in him more.

Week 3— Practicing Solitude

Solitude is harder than we think (see chapter 9). We are uncomfortable with silence and solitude because we are uncomfortable with ourselves. When we are quiet, that's when the ghosts and goblins of our fears and anxieties come to the surface. And we have worked hard to stuff them down with busyness. Busyness is extremely effective at temporarily numbing and disconnecting us to what's wrong inside. But it's inadequate to heal us. Practicing solitude invites us to quiet ourselves in the presence of Christ so that he can heal what comes up: wounds, fears, lies, or sinful ambitions.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. What distracts you from solitude? Phone? Email? To-do lists?
2. What are you afraid will come up in solitude? Why do you resist it?
3. What good do you imagine coming from practicing solitude?

The Practice:

1. Before you begin reading Scripture, read Psalm 62:1, "For you alone, my soul waits in silence." Pray this verse to God and sit alone with him for 5-10 mins. Set a timer so that you don't have to keep checking your watch or phone to see if your times up. If you get distracted, merely redirect your thoughts to him.
2. Inevitably, thoughts and distractions will come up. When your time is up, write the distractions down. Maybe they are worries, frustrations, sinful ambitions, responsibilities that are weighing you down, or a difficult conversation with a friend. Whatever it is, offer it up to God for help or healing.
3. When doing ordinary responsibilities like cleaning a room, folding laundry, or doing the dishes, do it without headphones or your phone nearby. Do it in silence and intentionally pay attention to where your mind is drawn to and what God might be showing you.

Week 4— Practicing Fasting

Fasting is the spiritual exercise of preparing and sustaining your appetite for God (read chapter 10). Our prayers are enhanced by fasting since it grows our hunger for God over other things we ordinarily crave. Prayer and communion with God become like feasts, satisfying our hunger that can only come from being with God. The devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, saying, “Turn these stones into bread.” Jesus was certainly hungry after fasting forty days in the wilderness, but in his fasting a deeper hunger had risen to the surface. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,” Jesus said. The regular rhythm of fasting guards against spiritual lethargy. If we struggle with the desire for prayer, the discipline of fasting helps us along the way.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. What comes to mind when you think about fasting? What experiences do you have of fasting, if any?
2. How can you imagine self-denial being a good thing for you in this season?

The Practice:

1. Make space in your week for fasting. Start with a meal. Make some accommodations ahead of time to fast in private. Drink lots of water. If you are at work during your times of fasting, have some plans on how to keep your fasts for God to see rather than others. Meditate on Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness this week in Luke 4 or some other passage that provokes your hunger for God instead of browsing on your phone or computer.
2. When hunger pangs come and you feel weak, simply pray, “Help me, Father,” or “Give me strength, Lord.” Trust that God will supply what you need.
3. If during the week you sense some capacity to fast two meals or a whole day, do it. Let this discipline challenge your limitations. But remember that fasting is a means to finding your satisfaction in God above all other things, not a means to be righteous before God or others.
4. During your fasts, pay attention to the feelings and thoughts that arise. What thoughts or emotions interrupt your prayers or your attention to God? It’s likely that your flesh will not only cry out in hunger, but in other temptations. Pray for help. Remember God is with you and listens to your prayers. Pray that this time would increase your hunger for God over the things you are saying “no” to.

Week 5— Practicing Rest

When Christ says to us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” (Matthew 11:28), that “rest” isn’t referring to a singular moment or occasional experience but a new kind of life—a new rest of the soul. The weekly discipline of Sabbath rest (see Chapter 11) is a supportive rhythm that solidifies a spirit of rest. We don’t often think of rest as a discipline. In fact, my guess is that even Christians who know their Bibles see a day of rest or Sabbath as a day designed primarily for recovery from or a precaution against exhaustion. But Sabbath is a discipline of saying “yes” to God’s gift by experiencing a day of joyful rest every week. But saying “yes” to this greater joy means saying “no” to the smaller joys of what accomplishment and work promises us.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. What is attractive about the practice of weekly Sabbath rest? What are you hopeful for?
2. Does a day of no work and achievement sound stressful? Does it seem lazy? Unrealistic? How might the Bible answer your questions or objections?

The Practice:

1. Needless to say, Sabbath is only one day a week, but it includes and impacts the rest of the week. In the way that you would prepare for a honored guest to stay at your home (you make space in your week and in your home), you prepare for Sabbath. Make accommodations in your work week, prepare food ahead of time, or get together with friends and throw a feast! If you have children, what accommodations do they need in order to rest as well?
2. Turn off phones alerts, put aside email, and set work aside for 24 hours. Find a good novel to read, take a walk, or take a lawn chair to the park with packed foods and drinks and relax. Invite friends to spend the day or the evening with you.
3. Plan a meal ahead of time with others. Light candles and sing. Let the time be sacred, knowing that God is present and be grateful. But don’t let it be solemn. Let Psalm 104:15 guide you: bread for strength and wine for joy!
4. How might you incorporate a weekly Sabbath into your weekly rhythms from now on?

Week 6— Practicing Corporate Worship

Corporate worship (see chapter 12) uses deeper mechanisms of change because it is not a habit that aims directly at self-improvement but at enjoyment. Worship is a command to enjoy an object. We are stirred toward desiring and loving God. But when we aim our love and desires toward God, we are changed. Corporate worship results in deep transformation because it aims at deep desires and draws us into participation with deep realities. Worship, and particularly corporate worship, is a spiritual rhythm of great importance.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. How might you be tempted to undervalue gathering weekly with other Christians for worship? How have you let other things get in the way of regularly attending corporate worship?
2. Can you describe how intentionality and prayerfulness would be valuable to how corporate worship impacts you?
3. Have you been overly critical or nit-picky of the preaching or singing in the past? How so?

The Practice:

1. Like Sabbath, corporate worship is normally just one day a week, but Lent is a good season to include the rest of the week in preparing for corporate worship.
2. In the days previous to Sunday worship, pray intentionally for the service: Monday: pray for the entire church body to encounter God in a transformative way; Tuesday: pray for the preacher so have clarity and power from Christ in their preaching; Wednesday: pray for the leaders of children and adult classes and those attending those classes to experience fruitful spiritual growth; Thursday: pray for those who might be attending who do not have faith to be led to Christ or if you have friends you'd like to see attend worship; Friday: pray for those who have had a hard time attending worship whether for health reasons or because they've struggled in their relationship with Christ; Saturday: pray for your own heart to receive what Christ has for you.
3. On Sunday, come 15-20 minutes early. As you come in, ask Christ to provide an intensified experience of his presence today. As you see other congregants arrive, pray for them. If you see people who seem new or unfamiliar, welcome them with the hope of expressing the welcome of Christ. Pray that you and your fellow worshippers will come with a vulnerable heart to whatever God has for you.

Paying Attention to the Costs

In the 1980's, my father was a pilot for the Arizona border patrol. In training for the job, he needed an intensive course in Spanish. So for two months, he stayed in Texas, away from his family, and immersed in language study. By the time he was finished, he might not have been fluent, but he had a working grasp of the language to take to work and grow into. As the years passed, he became more fluent in the language through daily and regular use. I remember a trip to Nogales, Mexico, and watching him joke with our bus driver in Spanish. I had no idea what they were saying, but they seemed at home with each other.

This Lent guide is meant to be a kind of intensive course through the world of prayer. You likely won't feel at home quite yet after the six weeks, but you'll likely have a working grasp of the language through daily and regular practice. But also, through God's grace, you'll likely feel strengthened and changed along the way.

Over the years of pressing into the rhythms of prayer and the presence of Christ, whatever the costs have been have always seemed worth it in the end. And there are costs. Lent is a season where you pay attention to the costs of discipleship and say to Christ along side others brothers and sisters, "It is worth it." It truly is.