

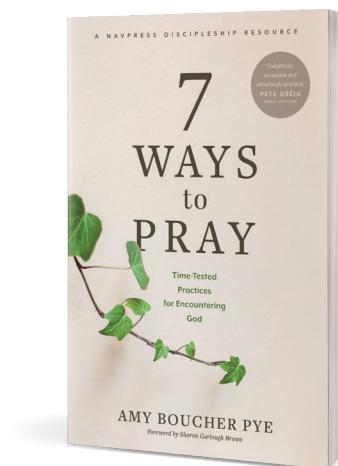
LEADER'S GUIDE

AMY BOUCHER PYE

Thank you for choosing
7 Ways to Pray for your
small group! When we
turn to God, he loves to
meet us, and when we do
so with others, we can
receive encouragement
and grace. In this
practical, hands-on
book, you'll find many
exercises you can choose
for each session.

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Before You Start

You may be forming a new group, or you may have met together for many years. Here are a few things to consider as you prepare.

Make praying before each session a priority, as God loves to collaborate with us. As you bring each individual before him, praying for them one by one, God might spark in your mind ideas for the meeting that you wouldn't have otherwise considered. He loves to help us shape the material so that it will meet the needs of those in our group—an amazing thought!

Allow enough time and silence for the prayer exercises. This is where, as leaders, we can feel most apprehensive—will God work through this exercise? Will people experience his presence? We can get nervous and be tempted to rush ahead. As I mention in *7 Ways to Pray*, I often set the stopwatch on my phone, and then I'm able to give ample time for the Spirit to work.

Be aware as well that deep emotions may come up for the participants. It's good to have a coleader or someone who is wise and mature on alert so that you are not alone if you want to support people after the session. Don't be afraid of connecting those in need with a leader at church or recommending a professional counselor.

And what about that one person who tends to dominate the conversation? This can be tricky, and it can feel like a dance when you're affirming what they offer while also trying to draw out the quieter members of your group. If the person is overly distracting to you and others, you might decide to talk with them at the end of the session and ask them to help you in encouraging the quieter people to share as well.

I find one of the most exciting things about leading prayer exercises is hearing from the group members how God revealed himself to them. Leave enough time in your session for people to offer up how they sensed God, if they are comfortable doing so. You may wish to make it a time of receiving what they share with gratitude while gently asking others not to comment on the contributions (so that people don't feel they are being critiqued).

Recommended Flow for the Meeting

Wondering how to structure your meeting? Here are some components you can incorporate. I've included suggested timings for an hour-and-a-half meeting, with five minutes of flex. Of course, if you've been meeting together for years, you will have a natural pattern already.

WELCOME AND OPENING PRAYER (UP TO 5 MINUTES): As you open the meeting in prayer, acknowledge God's presence and ask him to work through his Spirit. Thank him for those gathered and dedicate the time you have together. You might want to pray something along these lines:

Loving God, thank you that you've brought us together. Thank you that you promise that where two or three are gathered, you're with us. We long that you will work in and through us tonight [or today], that you'll guide our conversations, and that we'll meet with you during the times of prayer. Keep anything evil out and help us to exercise wisdom. We welcome you and look forward to how you will work in our lives! Thank you. In the wonderful name of Jesus, amen.

WARM-UP ACTIVITY (10 MINUTES): An opening activity to break the ice can be especially helpful if your group is a new one. People tend to be more comfortable sharing in a meeting once they've already spoken, so you could start off with something as simple as introductions, including an open-ended question such as "Share a favorite vacation you've enjoyed and why." Or you might want to come up with an activity based on the theme of the meeting. For instance, if you are engaging with chapter 1, you could print out a Gospel passage for each person to read aloud and personalize, and then say how it makes them feel. Take Mark 11:24. If I was given that verse, I'd say, "My passage is from Mark: 'Therefore, I tell you, Amy, that whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.' Wow—that encourages me but also convicts me. Everything I ask for in prayer I should believe that I will receive? I'm going to have to ponder whether I can do that."

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC (15 MINUTES): Using the chapter as your guide, share about the prayer practice you will be engaging with together. Give some of its background and history, and don't be afraid to say what you think of this way to pray—is it new to you? Is it one of your favorite ways to pray?

BIBLE READINGS (UP TO 5 MINUTES): Choose a Bible passage or two to focus on and have one or two people read them aloud to vary the voices in the room. I give suggestions in the chapters and have included passages to choose from.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (15–20 MINUTES): I've included four questions for each session that you can use as launching points for discussion in your group. You might need to exercise leadership at this point, for if your group members are a bit hesitant about the prayer exercises (“Will God reveal himself to me?” “Will I feel left out?”), they might be tempted to spend too much time talking instead of praying.

PRAYER PRACTICE (20–25 MINUTES): Time to pray! Choose one or two of the prayer exercises from those included in each chapter. Note especially those designed for use with groups. I hope you can approach them with joyful anticipation, trusting that God will move among you. The prayer activities form the main focal point of the meeting.

CLOSING PRAYER (5 MINUTES): Close your meeting in prayer, thanking God and dedicating yourselves to following him in the coming week. Here's an example:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we thank you for meeting with us tonight [or today]. Thank you for helping us to pray in a way that may have been new to us. Continue to work in our minds and hearts, letting anything that's not of you to fall away and not stick to us. Give us joy as we leave, and be with us during our time apart until we meet again. Thank you for giving us so many ways to pray and for delighting in communicating with us. In Jesus' name, amen.

SESSION 1

Praying with the Bible

God infuses our reading of the Bible with his Spirit, meeting us and sparking his Word into life. Although times of studying the Bible are vital for our faith, engaging with it prayerfully is crucial too.

SELECTION OF BIBLE PASSAGES

- Psalm 46:1-3—God our refuge and strength
- Isaiah 40:28-31—strength to the weary
- Jeremiah 31:13-14—mourning into gladness
- John 14:1-4—don't let your hearts be troubled
- Philippians 1:9-10—love abounding
- 1 Peter 5:7-10—cast anxiety on God

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does an unlimited God make himself known (see “The Knowable God,” starting on page 11)?
2. What do you think about the practice of “Bible roulette” (page 15 and following)?
3. Why can a simple practice such as personalizing Scripture (page 18 and following) touch us so deeply?
4. How do you like to engage with the Bible during your regular times of prayer? Why?

PRAYER PRACTICE

If you didn't use the personalization exercise in the warm-up, engage in this activity together.

Choose a passage of Scripture to share with the group, and ask them to put it into their own words (see “Write Bible-Inspired Prayers,” page 19 and following).

Make sure everyone has a device to write on or pen and paper. Direct them to the suggested passages to engage with and give them ample time to put the text into their own words (five to ten minutes—or when you can see that everyone has finished and starts to look restless). Ask people to share their renderings.

Alternatively, have people pray through a passage of Scripture, writing Bible-inspired prayers (page 19 and following) and choosing from the list above.

SESSION 2

Praying through the Bible (*lectio divina*)

Praying through the Bible—*lectio divina*, which is Latin for “sacred reading”—is a four-step process of engaging with a text from the Bible slowly and prayerfully (page 28 and following). The four steps are reading, reflecting, responding, and resting.

SELECTION OF BIBLE PASSAGES

NOTE ALSO THE FIVE PASSAGES LISTED ON PAGE 34.

- Leviticus 26:11-12—God walks among us
- Isaiah 30:19-21—God answers cries for help
- John 15:1-8—Jesus the vine
- Romans 8:9-11—Spirit of God in believers
- Ephesians 3:16-19—power to grasp God’s love
- 1 John 3:21-24—commands of Jesus

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you respond to the opening example of James Bryan Smith and his experience of praying with Luke 1:26-38 (page 25 and following)?
2. How does considering the changes in culture over the centuries, as it’s led us away from a practice of sacred reading, help you to embrace this practice (see the discussion starting on page 27)?
3. What insights did you gain from the worked example “Praying through a Psalm” (page 35 and following)?
4. Which of the four steps especially appeal to you? Which does not? Why?

PRAYER PRACTICE

Engage with the group practice starting on page 38. Choose one of the Scripture passages listed above or in the chapter, or one that you feel is right for your group.

SESSION 3

Practicing the Presence of God

A wonderful truth and promise of the Christian faith is that God dwells in his followers through his Son and Spirit. With his presence in us, we are never alone.

SELECTION OF BIBLE PASSAGES

- Exodus 33:12–17—God promises his presence to Moses
- 1 Kings 8:1–11—God’s glory fills the Temple
- Psalm 145:18–19—God close to those who call on him
- Jeremiah 23:23–29—a God nearby
- Matthew 28:20—Jesus promises to be with his disciples
- John 14:15–21—the indwelling Jesus and Spirit

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “God’s center is everywhere, while God’s circumference is nowhere” (quoted on page 42). Discuss this idea—what does it mean?
2. God only filled certain people in the Old Testament with his Spirit (page 46 and following). What difference does it make that following Pentecost (see Acts 2), the Spirit indwells all believers now?
3. How could you join Brother Lawrence in practicing God’s presence throughout your day (page 49 and following)?
4. How do you feel about silence in your prayers (page 61 and following)? How do you best deal with distractions when you’re praying?

PRAYER PRACTICE

Lead your group through either the exercise starting on page 47 about Jesus being the Vine and we the branches or the practice starting on page 59, “Christ’s Presence in our Present,” which includes step-by-step instructions for use in a group setting.

SESSION 4

Hearing God

God loves communicating with us, as we see throughout the Bible. We can learn to discern his still, small voice as we turn our hearts and minds toward him.

SELECTION OF BIBLE PASSAGES

- 1 Samuel 3—God speaks to Samuel in the Temple
- Psalm 29:3-5—the voice of the Lord
- Isaiah 30:19-21—God answers his people
- John 8:47—those who belong to God hear his voice
- John 10:3-5—the sheep know the Shepherd’s voice
- 1 John 5:14-15—we have confidence in knowing God hears us

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does God speak to you?
2. What strikes you about the story of Samuel in the Temple (page 67 and following)? How does it inform our understanding of discerning how God speaks to us?
3. Amy quotes Oswald Chambers on page 79: “Get into the habit of saying, ‘Speak, Lord,’ and life will become a romance.” What do you think he means by this? How do you respond?
4. Teresa of Ávila learned to hear God’s voice in an era when people weren’t encouraged to listen on their own. Which of her criteria for discernment (page 83 and following) resonates with you most? Why?

PRAYER PRACTICE

Conduct the prayer practice “Hearing God with Others,” starting on page 76. Depending on the size of your group and how long your session is, you may need to break into smaller groups so each person has the opportunity to receive from others. Note toward the end of page 78 the recommendation not to offer any interpretation.

SESSION 5

Praying with Lament

We live in a world that is not as God created it, and thus we have many reasons and opportunities to cry out to him in lament. A robust view of lament will help us to voice our feelings and emotions to God.

SELECTION OF BIBLE PASSAGES

- Job 3—a lament of Job
- Psalm 13—asking God how long
- Psalm 44:23-26—a cry for God to awake
- Lamentations 1:11-16—cries of suffering
- Mark 14:32-36—Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane
- Matthew 27:45-50—Jesus’ cry on the cross

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Lamenting means “to complain, grumble, question, and protest” (page 93). What role does lament play in your life? In the life of your church? What is your response to complaints—your own or others’?
2. How do the Psalms help you pray (page 93 and following)? How comfortable are you praying through the range of emotions they represent?
3. Although the Bible even contains a book named Lamentations (page 97 and following), why do you think some Christians shy away from a practice of lament?
4. The way that the character May in *The Secret Life of Bees* handled her feelings of sadness was to release them into a wall of stones (page 104 and following). How do you give your pain to God?

PRAYER PRACTICE

Choose which practice of lament you’d like to lead. If you aren’t able to meet outside for the “Praying at the Wall” exercise (starting on page 104), you could fashion a representation of a wall with slots cut out of cardboard. Or “Praying with Our Senses” (from page 107) is especially effective in a group of people.

SESSION 6

Praying Imaginatively with a Gospel Story

Placing ourselves into a gospel story with our imagination can be a way of encountering the living God. We might also uncover some buried emotions that we can bring to God.

SELECTION OF BIBLE PASSAGES

SEE ALSO THE PASSAGES ON PAGES 126 AND 134–35.

- Luke 1:26-38—the angel Gabriel appears to Mary
- Matthew 3:13-17—the baptism of Christ
- John 2:13-25—Jesus clears the Temple of sellers
- Matthew 14:13-21—Jesus feeds five thousand
- Matthew 14:22-33—Jesus walks on the water
- Luke 24:13-35—Jesus appears to the disciples on the Emmaus road

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss this practice of placing yourself into a gospel story. Have you done it before? How do you feel about it?
2. What do you think of the discussion on page 115 about the interaction between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ? How can we move from engaging with Jesus on the pages of the gospels to the risen, living Christ?
3. If we “see God as an angry despot, an uncaring creator, or a demanding father,” how will our practice of gospel contemplation be affected (page 123 and following)? Why?
4. Discuss Ignatius’s three questions (page 126). How do they help us to enter the gospel story? To reflect on our own story?

PRAYER PRACTICE

Lead the “Shining with Light” prayer practice (from page 127), following the instructions. Or choose one of the gospel stories to enter into with your group. Start with a prayer asking God to lead you in a fruitful encounter with the story. Read through the passage once or twice to the group so they are familiar with it. Then lead them through the story, adding details and questions that will root them into the story. For instance, what do they see, hear, smell, feel? Who are they in the story? What are they doing? Allow enough time for silence so they can enter into the story. Bring the exercise to a close with a prayer of thanks and dedication, and then allow some time for people to share about their experience.

SESSION 7

Praying the Examen

The examen is a practice of looking back over a set period of time to see how we moved toward or away from God. We can incorporate this type of prayer into our daily lives to remain tender toward God and his Spirit.

SELECTION OF BIBLE PASSAGES

SEE ALSO THE PASSAGES ON PAGES 126 AND 134–35.

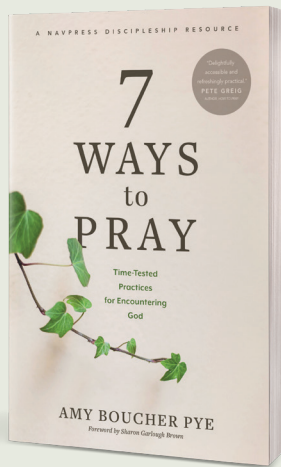
- Lamentations 3:40—let us examine our ways
- Psalm 139:23-24—search our hearts, God
- Matthew 7:1-5—judge not
- Luke 15:17-24—the prodigal son’s pigsty moment
- 1 Corinthians 11:28-31—examine yourselves
- 1 John 3:19-22—our hearts do not condemn us

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you gain from hearing about Ignatius of Loyola’s period of excessive spiritual practices and how he then incorporated the examen into his life (page 139 and following)?
2. How can we pray the examen without morphing it into a legalistic exercise? What keeps it a vibrant, alive practice (page 140 and following)?
3. What do you see as the benefits and challenges of the examen (pages 146 and following)?
4. Regarding John Wesley’s questions for self-examination (page 152 and following), what advantages and disadvantages does a structured approach to the examen entail?

PRAYER PRACTICE

Pray through the examen as a group, leading them through the five steps. Use the instructions on page 145 as a guide. Or you may choose one of the themed exercises starting on page 148, praying about a particular person, our work, or the world. Allow time at the end of the practice for group members to share how it felt and how they sensed they were moving toward or away from God.



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