

HEART OF THE MATTER

PRAYER



BIG IDEA: Through prayer we can experience, in a deeper way, the life and love of Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is essentially a relationship, yet we often fail to experience the relational dimension. For some, this is caused by busyness or other distractions. For others it is a lack of understanding about what Christ desires. Apart from a relationship, the Christian life is simply an intellectual and volitional religion—"I think right, and then I do right."

In Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul shares his prayer that the Ephesians would have a genuine, inner life experience of relationship with Christ and His love.



DESIRED LIFE CHANGE: As a result of this study, students will begin to apply the principle of seeking to know and experience Christ in prayer. As a result, their relationship with Christ should become more genuine and emotionally powerful.



AUDIENCE: This lesson is intended for more mature, involved students.



LEADER'S PREPARATION: Read and study Ephesians 3:14-21 to get a firm grasp of this study's central passage. Work through the lesson, answering the questions as you anticipate the group will. Take time before the group to pray through the passage. Asking God to make these truths a reality in your life and your group members' lives. Think through how you might share with the group some of your personal pilgrimage in the area of prayer.



AT A GLANCE

As your group interacts in this study, they will think . . .

This is my **WORLD:** I'm often busy doing things for the Lord.

This is my **NEED:** In my busyness, I miss the depth of the genuine relational experience with Christ.

This is my **ANSWER:** Prayer which seeks Christ Himself, rather than simply His gifts, opens the door to the depth of relationship Christ intended.

This is the **DIFFERENCE** it will make: Prayer will enable me to experience new riches in my relationship with Christ and will overflow into changes in my lifestyle.

This is what I'll **DO:** I will actively seek a deeper experience of Christ and His love through prayer.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?



Many times, students involved in ministry are "going through the motions" with very little vital experience of the living Christ. We become puzzled when our committed disciples have trouble being motivated in the program we provide. We become discouraged when they bail out or burn out because something is missing.

Howard Hendricks has said, "You cannot impart that which you do not possess." And intimacy with Christ can only be passed on to our disciples when it has first been experienced.

God has given us prayer as the pathway to that experience. We will continue to be activity-driven if we lack clarity on the role of prayer in producing this reality. Prayer is the main vehicle into the inner life experience. However, most Christians do not know it, experience it, or seek it.

In our discipling it's essential that we open our students to the possibilities of experiencing the reality of Christ through prayer, and urge them to experiment with prayer in this way.

STATE: One of the greatest disappointments in a marriage would be to wake up 20 years after the wedding and realize that you have been going through the motions without experiencing a genuine love in your relationship. This same experience can occur in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Today we want to explore the role that prayer plays in experiencing love in our relationship with Christ.

1 READ

2 ASK: Dan shares his experience as a 20-year staff member. How might a student express this same reality?

(Goes to weekly meetings, involved in small groups, conferences, shares faith, leads Bible studies, yet still fails to experience an intimate relationship with Christ; feels burned out, maybe even used.)

3 READ

4 ASK: When Dan realized his dilemma, he turned to prayer. What do we tend to turn to? What are we tempted to do?

(Give up; quit; keep plugging away while settling for less than the best.)

5 READ

6 ASK: In a nutshell, how would you describe the change that occurred in Dan's life?

(He began to sense or experience God's personal love for him; he woke up emotionally to God's love; God's love began to overflow in his life.)


7 STATE: Dan's circumstances and experiences were unique. But the truth that he experienced is universal; that is, it applies to all. It does not need to take us 20 years on Campus Crusade for Christ staff to experience it. Nor does it have to involve a dramatic turning point in life. Today we want to explore how we can be experiencing these truths ourselves.

8 REFLECT: Which stage do you identify with most: "Before"—all action but little inner reality; "During"—seeking for a deeper experience of God's love; or "After"—enjoying a rich experience of God's love? (This is for personal reflection not discussion.)

9 READ & LOOK UP VERSES

10 ASK
(To meet my needs of the moment: schoolwork, finances, etc.)

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: What are specific examples of things you pray for?


VERSION 1.3

HEART OF THE MATTER

TOOLBOX
 THINK
 OBSERVE
 CLOSE-UP
 WRITE
 DISCUSS
 FEELINGS
 BRAINSTORM
 REFERENCE
 PASSAGE
 ARTICLE
 BIG IDEA
 CROSSROAD

BEFORE

For nearly 20 years with Campus Crusade for Christ, I was considered a "good" staff member. I knew and practiced the concepts we taught, had good Bible study, saw many of my prayers answered, succeeded in ministry, attained national positions, supervised many staff, and ran great conferences. Yet, if you asked me about my inner experience of Christ or His love, I would have skirted the issue, talked about faith not feelings, and discoursed on the danger of depending upon experience. In truth, I had little inner reality.

DURING

About six years ago, through experiences too complicated and personal to retell here, I was drawn to the Ephesians 3 passage (and scores like it), in which the person praying is primarily asking for one thing—the existential experience of the love of Christ inside. I finally worked up the courage to begin to pray this way (actually somewhat skeptically), "God, please show up, but I doubt You will."

AFTER

To my amazement, within four weeks there were more inward manifestations of Christ and His love in my inner person than I had ever known before. Not only that, I gained new confidence and new empathy for others. Feeling compassion ceased being a mystery. My joy was no longer dependent on circumstances or successes. To top it off (in light of our result-oriented culture), my ministry—which had certainly been adequate—took on many more flavors of both love and power. Since then, I have experienced, at deeper levels than I ever thought possible, the "rivers of living waters" in my innermost being—as well as more sorrow, pain and suffering. But, even these are all part of experiencing His love.

DID YOU KNOW?

The most common prayer requests in the Bible are not requests for what God gives, but requests for God Himself: to know and experience Him in one's life. Examples:
 Psalm 27:4
 Psalm 42:1,2
 Psalm 63:1-3
 Psalm 84:8-10

DISCUSS

What is my most common prayer request?

REFLECT

With which stage of Dan's pilgrimage do I most identify?

1 **STATE:** Let's explore the passage the Lord used to awaken Dan to the reality of Christ's love in his inner life.

3 **READ:** 3:14, 15

ASK: Why do you think Paul begins this way?

(To let them know he's praying for them; he cares enough about their needs to pray.)

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: People in Paul's day usually stood to pray. What might Paul's statement that he knelt communicate?

(He's very sincere, pleading with God for Him to work; he's humble and submissive.)

What might Paul's reference to "his whole family" have emphasized?

(Their common relationship to each other and to God.)

4 **READ REQUEST #1:** 3:16

ASK: What does it mean to be strengthened with power?

(They would not be depending on their own power; they would be given supernatural ability.)

Why do you think Paul was seeking this for them?

(They must not have been experiencing it to the fullest.)

What is the difference between one who is strengthened with power through God's Spirit and one who is not?

(The person who is strengthened has spiritual, emotional and physical vitality; he experiences the reality of God's power and presence in his life. The person who is not will tend to be frustrated, burned out or unable to function as a Christian.)

In this context, what might the "power" be for?
(To experience Christ dwelling in their hearts through faith.)

5 **READ REQUEST #2:** 3:17

STATE: Though this verse may be treated as a separate request or desire, it is tied to verse 16 as the result of the strengthening.

ASK: What does it mean? If they already have Christ indwelling them, why does he pray for them to experience this?

(NOTE: The emphasis here is not simply on *indwelling*; i.e., the fact of His presence within. To *dwell* emphasizes that Christ is living out His life in and through them. One way to picture this is that if I "dwell" in my home, I am making use of all of my house to live out my life—the dining room to eat, the bedroom to rest, etc.)

6 **READ REQUEST #3:** 3:18, 19a

ASK: What is the difference between the first phrase, "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ," and the second, "to know this love"? (The first is the seeking of the magnitude of God's love, how much He loves us; the second, to deeply and experientially know the nature of this love)

2 **READ**

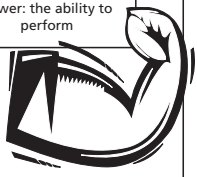
Praying for the Inner Life Experience

REQUEST #1

"strengthened with power"

KEY WORD

Power: the ability to perform




REQUEST #3

"may have the power to grasp . . . and know this love"

KEY WORDS

Grasp: to comprehend
Know: to understand through experience



Ephesians 3:14-21

14 For this reason
I kneel before the Father,
15 from whom his whole family
in heaven and
on earth derives its name.
16 I pray
THAT out of his glorious riches
he may strengthen you
with power
through his Spirit
in your inner being.
17 **SO THAT** Christ may dwell in your hearts
through faith.
And I pray
THAT you,
18 being rooted and established in love,
may have power,
together with all the saints,
to grasp how wide
and long
and high
and deep
is the love of Christ,
19 and to know this love
that surpasses knowledge—
THAT you may be filled to the
measure of all the fullness of God.
20 Now to him
who is able to do
immeasurably more
than all we ask or imagine,
according to his power
that is at work within us,
21 to him be glory
in the church
and in Christ Jesus
throughout all generations,
for ever and ever! Amen.
(emphasis added)

CONTEXT

Paul's letter to the Ephesians can be divided into two sections: chapters 1-3 contain great truths about the believer, and chapters 4-6 tell how the believer should live. In Ephesians Paul records two great prayers for the Ephesian believers: 1:15-19 and 3:14-21.

REQUEST #2

"Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith"

KEY WORD

Heart: the seat of man's personality; the innermost center of man

REQUEST #4

"may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

KEY WORD

Fullness: all that God is in all of His attributes

DISCUSS

"Now to him who is able . . ." (3:20,21)

How does Paul's conclusion relate to these four requests?

7 **READ REQUEST #4:** 3:19b

ASK: What does it mean to "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God"? (That God who is infinite in all of His attributes—unlimited love, power, grace, etc.—allows me to experience all of who He is to the fullest degree possible.)

8 **REFLECT:** Evaluate for yourself, on a scale of 1 to 10, how fully do you think you experience the reality of what Paul prayed for the Ephesians to experience?

9 **READ:** 3:20,21

ASK

(The requests can seem too great to truly experience, until we recognize the truth of what God is able to do in and through our lives by His power at work within us.)

1 READ

2 ASK: How is Phillips' quote reflected in Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3?

(Paul's prayer is seeking a genuine experience; he's not focused on performance in the prayer.)

What is the difference between the Christianity of the early church and ours in the twentieth century? To us, Christianity is primarily a performance. To them, it was primarily an experience.

J. B. Phillips

Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him
 And he is inviting you—and me—to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in
 We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our hearts' delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest.
 The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer. Perhaps you have never prayed before except in anguish or terror. It may be that the only time the Divine Name has been on your lips has been in angry expletives. Never mind. I am here to tell you that the Father's heart is open wide—you are welcome to come in. Perhaps you do not believe in prayer. You may have tried to pray and were profoundly disappointed . . . and disillusioned. You seem to have little faith, or none. It does not matter. The Father's heart is open wide—you are welcome to come in.

—Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding The Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins), pp. 1, 2.

3 STATE: Richard Foster introduces his latest book on prayer by writing about the heart of God.

4 READ

5 ASK: How does the image of God's heart being our true home make you feel?

(It's inviting; feels open.)

Why do you think that Foster chooses to use it?

(It is a relational picture; it gives a sense of security.)

What part of this seems most inviting to you?

(I can actually experience His presence, etc.)

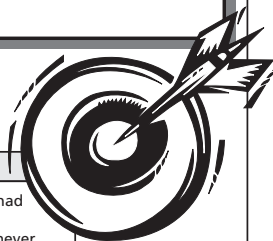
6 TRANSITION: (Not to be discussed.) Will experiencing this intimate relationship make a difference in our lives?

7 READ

8 ASK: Why did Ed experience change?

(He changed his focus; he quit thinking about his sin and began focusing on Christ.)

Will this make a difference?



CASE STUDY

Ed had been a Christian for a year but confided in me of a tremendous struggle he had with sex. Though he'd been taught the truth of Christ regarding sex and knew the consequences of ignoring it, he found himself still drawn into the old patterns whenever he went out with a woman.

I asked him what he'd done to help himself, and he mentioned several important things, but stated that these still had lessened neither his temptation nor his ultimate yielding to it. I asked him if he had tried praying that God would lessen his sex drive. He said he had. I suggested it probably had not worked. He laughed and agreed. Then I shocked him by saying God does not intend to lessen it—he is not going to "neuter" people.

Then, I drew his attention to Ephesians 3:14-21. We talked about it and discussed some rudimentary ways he might learn to pray to experience God's love more and to extinguish his need to seek satisfaction in illicit sex. We prayed through the passage together, asking for a deeper experience of Christ's love for him, especially when he felt tempted. I left him, assuring him that I would be praying as well.

In the weeks that followed, I received from Ed two wonderful letters about how Christ had "shown up" on the inside in response to his prayers, how he was having a new encounter with the love of Christ, and how, even in sexual temptation, he had been able to say "yes" to God and "no" to sin.

DISCUSS

Why did Ed experience change?

9 STATE: What Ed experienced was not just the result of positive thinking. It was an experience of the greatest power in the universe. The trials and struggles we face are complex and can involve many factors. But what Ed experienced will always be a significant factor in how we deal with our struggles. At times it will be the only solution.

PAUL'S PRAYERS

Romans 15:13
 Ephesians 1:15-23
 Philippians 1:9-11
 Colossians 1:9-14
 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13; 5:23
 2 Thessalonians 2:16,17; 3:16
 Philemon 4-6

Come and help us, Lord Jesus. A vision of your face will brighten us, but to feel your Spirit touching us will make us vigorous. Oh, for the leaping and walking of the man born lame . . . May a holy exhilaration take possession of every part of us; may our mouths be filled with laughter and our tongue with singing.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon
 1834-1892

I beg you, O Lord, that the fiery and sweet strength of your love may absorb my soul away from all things that are under heaven, that I may die for love of your love as you deigned to die for love of my love.

Francis of Assisi
 1181-1226

Open wide the window of our spirits, O Lord, and fill us full of light; open wide the door of our hearts that we may receive and entertain you with all our powers of adoration and love.

Christina Rossetti
 1830-1894

A sampler of prayers from those who have desired to experience Christ's life and love.

God, of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are sufficient for me.

Julian of Norwich
 1392-1416

O Lord, you who are all merciful, take away my sins from me and enkindle within me the fire of your Holy Spirit. Take away this heart of stone from me and give me a heart of flesh and blood, a heart to love and adore you, a heart which may delight in you, love you and please you, for Christ's sake.

Ambrose
 339-397

Eternal God, my sovereign Lord, I acknowledge all I am, all I have, is yours. Give me such a sense of your infinite goodness that I may return to you all possible love and obedience.

John Wesley
 1703-1791



YOUR TURN

Blank area for writing a prayer.



TRY THIS

In biblical times and throughout history, many believers have found it helpful to write out their prayers. Try keeping a notebook/journal in which you record your prayers.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the *New International Version*, ©1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Published by Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

1 TRANSITION: This is not a new emphasis in prayer, nor is it untested. Not only is it found throughout the prayers of the Bible, it has also been the experience of countless saints throughout the ages. Here are a few examples of the prayers of men and women who experienced the presence of Christ in their lives through prayer.

2 READ: a few carefully chosen quotes or, if time permits, all of them.

3 APPLY: Now it's your turn. Just like the psalmist and Paul recorded their prayers in the Bible, and saints wrote their prayers throughout the ages, let's take a few minutes to write a prayer. Write a prayer that expresses your desire to experience Christ's life and love. It could closely parallel Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3, or it could be completely your own words and ideas. The main goal is to be honest with God.

4 REVIEW: If time permits, have the group reflect and share the main points of the study.

5 PRAY: Close with a time of conversational prayer.



BOOKS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Prayer: Finding The Heart's True Home – Richard Foster (Harper Collins)



TOPIC CONNECTIONS

Related *InterACTA* small group studies: *Hotline to Heaven; Under The Influence.*

DIGGING DEEPER

For further discussion, you may find it helpful to consider what prayer will and will not change. The following outline is adapted from an article discussing that very issue. While the article develops and illustrates each point with many implications, this outline will simply serve to give you some ideas upon which to build.

When will prayer “change things”? What things will it change and not change? How can we tell if God will grant our request or not?

1. Almost everyone agrees that prayer changes the person who prays (Philippians 4:6,7).
2. Not only does it change the person who prays, it also can affect change in the people and situations about which we pray (Acts 4:23-31).
3. Scripture even states that prayer has occasionally changed God’s mind (Exodus 32:9-14).

Those situations that prayer does not change:

1. God’s fixed purposes (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).
2. When we ask God to change another person. He does not coerce people, though He does bring circumstances to bear on them and thereby influences their decisions (Luke 13:34, 35).
3. A third factor in explaining why our petitions are not always granted is perhaps the most obvious. We hinder our own effectiveness in prayer (James 4:2).

—Thomas L. Constable, *What Prayer Will and Will Not Change* (unpublished).

O V E R V I E W O F M E E T I N G T I M E



Planning your group session

	INTERACTION AS A GROUP	INTERACTION WITH THE STUDY & WORD	INTERACTION WITH GOD	UPCOMING INFORMATION	OTHER IDEAS
	Ice breaker? Refreshments?	Provided. Add personal story?	Worship / Praise / Prayer time?	Next meeting? Special event?	Music / Video?
Allocating your time	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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