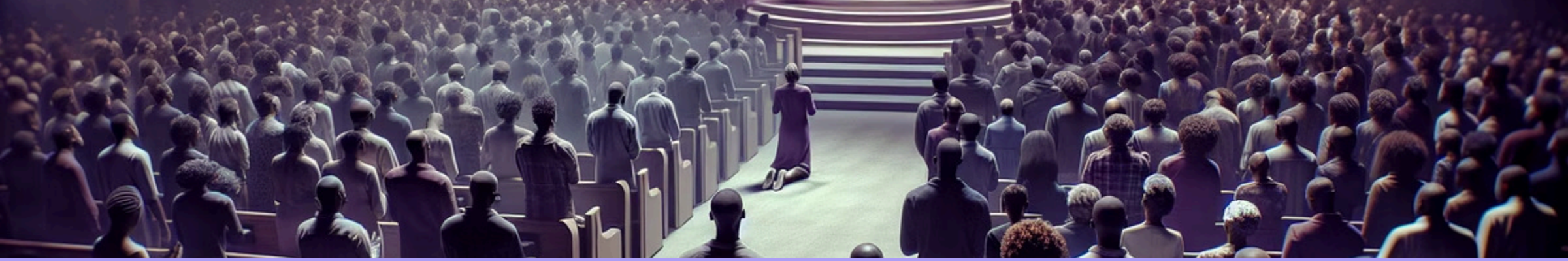


Have a Little Talk with Jesus:  
Learning the Language of Prayer

# A Journey Through the Many Voices of Prayer

Welcome to this sacred journey of discovering the rich tapestry of prayer that has sustained our faith community through generations. Over the next nine weeks, we'll explore how prayer becomes the very breath of our spiritual lives, connecting us to God and to one another in powerful ways.





# Week 1

## What Is Prayer? & Communal Prayer in Worship

In this opening week, we establish our foundation by exploring the very essence of prayer and understanding how communal prayer in worship creates a sacred space where the entire congregation meets God together. Prayer is not just individual conversation with the Divine, but a collective voice that rises from the heart of our community.

# Opening Scripture: Jesus Teaches Prayer

"He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come...'"

– Luke 11:1-2

This beautiful passage reveals the disciples' deep hunger to learn the language of prayer from Jesus himself. They witnessed something transformative in His prayer life that made them cry out, "Teach us!" Notice that Jesus didn't just tell them about prayer. He gave them words to pray, establishing the foundation that prayer is both personal relationship and communal practice.

The disciples had seen John the Baptist teach his followers to pray, and they recognized that every spiritual movement needs its own prayer language. Jesus responded by giving them and us the Lord's Prayer, a pattern that has shaped Christian worship for over two millennia.



# Opening Scripture: The First Church in Prayer

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

– Acts 2:42

The early church understood that prayer was not an afterthought or a ritual to rush through. It was one of their four foundational pillars. Notice the text says "the prayers" (plural), indicating that the first Christians had developed a rich variety of prayer practices that formed the backbone of their community life.

This verse shows us that from the very beginning, Christian worship was built on four essential elements: learning (apostles' teaching), community (fellowship), sacrament (breaking of bread), and **prayer**. These early believers "devoted themselves" to prayer with the same commitment they brought to studying Scripture and sharing meals together.

In our African American tradition, this devotion to communal prayer has been our lifeline through slavery, Jim Crow, civil rights struggles, and every challenge we've faced as a people. Prayer has always been our anchor and our strength.

# Defining Prayer: Voices from Our Tradition

## Richard Foster

*"Prayer is finding the heart's true home in God."*

Foster reminds us that prayer is not just speaking words into the air but it's about coming home to where we belong. When we pray, we return to our spiritual dwelling place, the presence of God where our souls find rest and restoration.

## Howard Thurman

*"Prayer is the opening of the self to God. It begins where we are."*

Dr. Thurman, that great mystic and mentor to the civil rights movement, understood that authentic prayer doesn't require us to be perfect or put together. We come to God exactly as we are, in our current circumstances, with our real struggles and genuine hopes.

## James Cone

*"Prayer in the Black tradition is survival, resistance, and hope."*

Liberation theologian James Cone captures the distinctive power of prayer in our tradition. For African Americans, prayer has never been just personal piety. It has been our weapon against oppression, our strategy for survival, and our source of hope for a better tomorrow.

These three definitions work together to give us a comprehensive understanding of prayer. It's our spiritual home (Foster), it meets us where we are (Thurman), and it sustains us through struggle while fueling our hope (Cone). This is the rich foundation we build upon in our prayer life.

# Biblical Foundation for Prayer

## Psalm 62:8

*"Pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us."*

The psalmist invites us to complete transparency with God. The phrase "pour out" suggests not just sharing our thoughts, but emptying ourselves entirely—our fears, our joys, our confusion, our gratitude. God can handle whatever we bring, and He becomes our safe place in the process.



## Philippians 4:6

*"In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."*

Paul gives us a practical prayer formula: bring **everything** to God (no issue too small or too large), approach with **thanksgiving** (gratitude transforms our perspective), and make our **requests known** (God invites our honest asking). This Scripture reminds us that prayer is both comprehensive and grateful.



# Prayer in Worship Is Always Communal

## ● Even if one person prays, they pray for all

When the pastor or prayer leader stands before the congregation, they are not offering their personal prayer to God. They become the voice of the entire community, gathering up the collective hopes, needs, and praises of everyone present. This is why we say "Amen"—we are agreeing with and participating in what is being offered on our behalf.

## ● Leaders gather the voice of the people before God

Prayer leaders in worship serve as collectors and presenters of the congregation's spiritual needs. They represent the sick who couldn't be present, the grieving who are too overwhelmed to speak, the celebrating who are bursting with joy, and everyone in between. This is a sacred responsibility that requires both sensitivity and spiritual maturity.

## ● "Let us pray" equals communal invitation

These three words are not just a transition in the service—they are an invitation for the entire congregation to join hearts and minds in approaching God together. When we hear "Let us pray," we're being called into unified spiritual action, creating a powerful collective prayer that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

# Communal Prayer in Scripture

## Exodus 15: Victory at the Red Sea

1

After God delivered Israel through the Red Sea, Moses and Miriam led the entire nation in a prayer-song of celebration and thanksgiving. This wasn't just two individuals singing, they were leading the collective voice of gratitude from hundreds of thousands of people who had just witnessed God's miraculous deliverance.

## Matthew 18:20: Jesus' Promise

3

*"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."* Jesus makes a specific promise about communal prayer—when believers gather together in His name, He shows up in a special way. There's something about corporate prayer that creates space for God's presence that individual prayer, while valuable, cannot replicate.

2

## Acts 1:14: Waiting for Pentecost

*"All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together, along with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."* The early disciples understood that waiting on God's promise required communal prayer. They prayed together consistently, creating the spiritual atmosphere for the Holy Spirit's outpouring on Pentecost.

# African American Witness: Prayer as Survival and Resistance



## Hush Harbors: Survival Prayers of the Enslaved

In the darkest period of American history, enslaved Africans created secret prayer meetings in hidden places called "hush harbors." These sacred spaces, often deep in woods or swamps, became places where our ancestors could pray authentically, sing freely, and maintain their connection to God despite the dehumanizing conditions of slavery. Prayer literally kept our people alive—spiritually, emotionally, and physically.



## AME Prayer Meetings: Discipline and Accountability

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded by Richard Allen in 1816, established regular prayer meetings as essential to Christian discipleship. These gatherings weren't just social events. They were spaces for spiritual formation, mutual accountability, and community building. Prayer meetings became the backbone of Black church life, creating bonds that sustained our communities through every challenge.



## Civil Rights Movement: Freedom Songs as Communal Prayers

"We Shall Overcome," "Precious Lord," and countless other freedom songs were actually prayers set to music. In mass meetings, on picket lines, and in jail cells, our people prayed through song, creating spiritual power that sustained the movement for justice. These weren't just protest songs—they were communal prayers that called on God's strength for the fight ahead.

# Invocation: Opening the Door to God's Presence



## Purpose of Invocation

The invocation serves as the spiritual doorway into worship. Its primary purposes are to welcome God's presence into our gathering, set the appropriate tone for worship, and help the congregation transition from the everyday world into sacred space. A good invocation is brief, focused, and creates anticipation for what God will do among us.

## Good Example:

*"Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us. As we gather in Your name, open our hearts to receive Your word and our voices to offer You praise. Be present among us now, we pray. Amen."*

## Common Pitfall to Avoid:

Turning the invocation into personal testimony or lengthy thanksgiving: *"Thank you, God, for not killing me in my sleep last night, and for letting me wake up this morning with the activities of my limbs..."* While gratitude is beautiful, the invocation should focus on inviting God's presence rather than recounting personal blessings.

# Altar Prayer: Lifting Up the People's Needs

## Purpose of Altar Prayer

The altar prayer, sometimes called pastoral prayer or intercessory prayer, serves as the moment when the prayer leader brings the congregation's collective needs before God. This is where we remember the sick, comfort the grieving, celebrate with the joyful, and intercede for our community and world. The altar prayer should feel comprehensive yet focused, covering the broad spectrum of human need without becoming a laundry list.

### Good Example:

*"Gracious God, we lift up those among us who are facing illness and pain. Bring healing to their bodies and peace to their hearts. Comfort those who are grieving the loss of loved ones. Strengthen those who are weary from life's struggles. Bless our young people as they navigate difficult decisions. Guide our leaders in wisdom. We pray for our community and our nation, that justice and peace might prevail. Hear our prayers, O Lord. Amen."*

### Common Pitfall to Avoid:

Turning altar prayer into mini-sermons or detailed stories: *"Lord, remember Sister Johnson who went to the doctor last Tuesday, and when she got there, Craig said to her... and then the nurse told her... and we just want to thank you because..."* While specific prayer requests are appropriate, lengthy narratives can distract from the prayer's purpose and lose the congregation's attention.

# Other Essential Worship Prayers



## Prayer Before Offering

This prayer acknowledges that all we have comes from God and asks His blessing on both the gifts we bring and the hearts that give them. It should be brief and focused on dedication and gratitude rather than fundraising. A good offertory prayer reminds us that giving is an act of worship, not just a church necessity.



## Prayer Before Sermon

This prayer asks God to open hearts and minds to receive His Word, to anoint the preacher with wisdom and clarity, and to help the congregation apply what they hear to their daily lives. It creates expectancy for God to speak through the proclamation of Scripture and prepares both preacher and congregation for transformation.



## Benediction

The benediction is not just a closing prayer but it's a sending forth with God's blessing. It acknowledges what God has done during worship and asks for His continued presence as we return to our daily lives. A good benediction bridges the gap between sacred worship time and everyday living, reminding us that God goes with us.

Each of these prayers serves a specific function in the flow of worship, helping to create a complete spiritual journey from gathering to sending. Understanding their unique purposes helps prayer leaders offer more effective and meaningful prayers that serve the congregation well.

# Discussion Questions for Small Groups

1

## Personal Reflection on Prayer Definitions

How does your personal definition of prayer compare with the definitions offered by Richard Foster ("finding the heart's true home in God"), Howard Thurman ("opening of the self to God, beginning where we are"), and James Cone ("survival, resistance, and hope")? Which of these definitions resonates most strongly with your experience? What would you add to create a more complete understanding?

2

## Communal vs. Individual Prayer

Why is it important to remember that prayers offered in worship are always communal, even when spoken by one person? How does this understanding change the way you participate in worship prayers? Share examples of when you've experienced the power of communal prayer versus individual prayer.

3

## Effective Worship Prayers

Think about invocation prayers you've heard in worship. What's the difference between an invocation that draws you into God's presence versus one that distracts you or feels disconnected? What specific elements make a worship prayer effective in helping the congregation connect with God?

Take 15-20 minutes to discuss these questions in groups of 4-5 people. Choose one person to share key insights with the larger group when you reconvene.

# Practice Exercise: Crafting Worship Prayers



## Prayer Writing Guidelines

### For Invocation:

- Welcome God's presence
- Set tone for worship
- Keep it brief and focused
- Avoid personal testimony

### For Altar Prayer:

- Lift up community needs
- Be comprehensive but not lengthy
- Include different types of concerns
- Avoid detailed stories

Remember: You're not trying to be eloquent or impressive. You're simply opening a doorway for the congregation to meet with God. Authenticity and clarity matter more than fancy words.

## Exercise Instructions

1. Break into small groups of 3-4 people
2. Each group chooses either an Invocation or Altar Prayer to draft
3. Write a prayer that is 2-3 sentences long
4. Remember the purpose of your chosen prayer type
5. Keep it communal—you're praying for everyone
6. Practice reading it aloud in your group
7. Select someone to share with the large group

# Memory Verse & Key Takeaway

## Memory Verse

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

– Acts 2:42

This verse will anchor our understanding throughout this series. The early church made prayer one of their four foundational practices, showing us that prayer is not optional or secondary—it's essential to authentic Christian community.



## Key Takeaway

**Prayer in worship is always communal.** Whether it's an invocation welcoming God's presence, an altar prayer lifting up the people's needs, or a benediction sending us forth with blessing, each type of worship prayer serves the entire congregation and has its specific role in our spiritual journey together.

Stay Spirit-focused and remember you're praying on behalf of all the people, not just yourself.

# Closing: Sweet Hour of Prayer

## Hymn: "Sweet Hour of Prayer"

*Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,  
That calls me from a world of care  
And bids me at my Father's throne  
Make all my wants and wishes known!*

As we close this first week of our journey together, let us remember that prayer is indeed our "sweet hour"—the time when we step away from the world's cares and find our true home in God's presence. Whether we pray alone or together, whether we use ancient words or speak from the heart, we are participating in the same sacred conversation that has sustained believers for thousands of years.

### Closing Prayer

*Gracious God, we thank You for this time of learning about the gift of prayer. Help us to carry these truths into our daily lives and our worship experiences. May we always remember that when we pray together, we become the voice of Your people. Bless us as we go forth, and draw us back to this sweet hour of prayer again and again. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

### Looking Ahead

Next week, we'll explore **Confession and Lament**—learning how to bring our failures and sorrows honestly before God, trusting in His mercy and grace to meet us in our deepest need. Come prepared to dive into the healing power of authentic prayer.