

Prayer Course II: Introduction

The programme:

1st week: Introduction and The Lords Prayer
(Prayer as spiritual action)

2nd week: Imaginative Bible reading
(St Ignatius)

3rd week: Praying for help
(Penitence and Arrow prayers)

4th week: Poetry (writing our own prayers)

5th week: Pilgrimage
(Movement and Contemplation)

6th week: Wrap up and Holy Week.

Before we start to look at how this course will be structured, a few key words of advice: Different personalities pray in very different ways and so in all probability some of these exercises will work well for you and some will not. Do not worry if you feel like you are not getting anywhere, the attempt is what matters and the attention to what does and does not help you open up to God's presence. So ultimately give these a go and then pray as you can. What is helpful though is to keep some kind of a journal of your experiences of the course so you can see what has helped, as sometimes the things we find hard are the most beneficial and that is easier to see in hindsight. That journal can be in written notes, poems, drawings, whatever you like (it is yours and no one else need see it).

Introduction

All Christian prayer is ultimately God's work of refocusing our whole being onto God. Opening ourselves up to God's refocusing of us onto God is no easy task for us, we are very good at focusing on ourselves and at distracting ourselves from God with various external or internal events and worries. To help believers over the millennia the Christian Churches have developed a range of approaches to help overcome these distractions and face down that self-focus and so open ourselves up to God's action. This course hopes to show some of those deep riches of the Christian prayer traditions.

Writing a course such as this is a humbling experience, the more I have researched and written, the more I have come to realise how shallow and stumbling are my own attempts at prayer. My only hope is that the following exercises might be of you to you as they have been to me. The course structure and content is in part drawn from my memories and notes of a prayer course run by the remarkable Anglican priest and scholar, John Bowker, which transformed my prayer life and I have found myself drawing on time and time again.

The course is set out as a sequence of exercises that are to be practised once a day for the following week, they should take about 20 minutes, and it is best to set aside a period of time each morning or evening to regularly practise. It is also often helpful to always sit in the same place which should be comfortable, private, calm and quiet. We will post up online recordings of the talks that go with the different exercises and do listen to those. If you find you miss a day don't worry, or try to catch up, just return to the regular practice as quickly as possible.

If you can then find someone or a group to meet with each week so you can share your experiences of that prayer method you have been practising the week before. This is best done with a small group of 2-5 people, and in those groups we need to simply hear each other's experiences of that prayer form and accept them as they are. There is no right or wrong response in prayer, so try not to pass comment on each other's experiences, not to cross question or try to draw out what others may wish to keep private. Also if people wish to say nothing about their experiences that should just be accepted and the group should simply move on to the next person. If someone

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has not had a chance or has forgotten to do the exercises for that week, or for that matter joins the group a few weeks into the course, then they should just sit and listen silently to the experiences of others and take up the course at the point the group is at. They can of course always try out the exercises they skipped at a later date, the order of the exercises is deliberate but not vital.

In all the exercises please read the instructions a few times and keep them to hand. Then start by asking God to help you pray, then follow the instructions on the exercise slowly and prayerfully before ending by slowly saying the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done
In earth, as it is in heaven:
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive them that trespass against us;
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.

Try to gently end your prayer time and let the prayers seep into the rest of your day.