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PRAYER

DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE?

SIX SESSIONS ON OUR
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD



SESSION ONE

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE



LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens. . . .

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?

PSALM 8:1, 3–4

INTRODUCTION (6 MINUTES)

DVD Introduction by Philip Yancey

Questions to Think About

- How would you describe your experiences with prayer?
- What do you understand the purpose of prayer to be?
- What do you long to experience in your prayer life?

GROUP DISCOVERY (35 MINUTES)

DVD Teaching Notes

Lessons from the mountains

Catching a glimpse of the “God’s Eye View”

Prayer: realigning our perspectives

We are not in control

God is not our accomplice

DVD Discussion

Prayer is the act of seeing reality from God’s point of view. . . . In prayer I shift my point of view away from . . . the speck that is myself. I gaze at the stars and recall what role I or any of us play in a universe beyond comprehension.

Prayer, p. 29

1. What is the God’s Eye View that Philip describes? (MEMORY JOGGER: How did the hikers appear to Philip and his wife as they looked down from the summit ridge? What big impact did the lightning storm have on Philip’s perception of life? When it comes to God’s work, who is the “accomplice”?)
2. The video segment provided several examples of how our human perceptions of what is most important and how life ought to work stand in opposition to the God’s Eye View of what is most important and how life really works.
 - In what ways do the messages of the world’s view of life contrast with Jesus’ message about what really matters in life?
 - What are some ways we might, as Philip suggests, correct the world’s messages with the God’s Eye View?

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3. When we come face to face with the reality of how little control we have over our future, many of us get a little nervous. What do you think could happen in our prayer life and in our relationship with God if, in the midst of our uncertain future, we intentionally chose to “be still and know that [he is] God”?

Bible Exploration

Be Still and Know That I Am God

Every day my vision clouds over so that I perceive nothing but a world of matter. It requires a daily act of will to remember what Paul told the sophisticated crowd in Athens: “[God] is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27–28).

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1. We tend to rely on our own sufficiency, but the Bible repeatedly exposes the true nature of earthly life. What unmistakable message about the God’s Eye View of life is communicated through Psalms 39:4; 90:12; James 4:13–14; and 1 Peter 1:24?

2. Job's trials challenged his perspective and led him to reflect intensely on his human condition and God's role in the world.
 - What did the Lord of the universe remind Job about when he was wallowing in self-pity and demanding that God respond to his theological queries? (See Job 38:4–11, and note that God's response continues through Job 40:2.)

 - In his great discourse, God didn't provide even one specific answer to Job's probing questions. But what did Job say in response to God's thundering query, "Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2), that shows he got God's message loud and clear? (See Job 42:1–6.)

3. Philip encourages us to recognize the importance of God's command in Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God." He helps us realize that we are not in control of the world (or our futures) and that the appropriate response to our condition is to be still before our powerful and merciful God and turn over our concerns and problems to that God. Let's deepen our understanding of what God means by this command and explore how we might go about obeying it.

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- Consider what the command means. The Latin imperative for “be still” is *vacate* (from which we get the word *vacation*), so God is inviting us to take a break and allow him to be God in our daily lives. In addition, the word translated “know” refers not only to intellectual knowledge but also to knowing God through worship and obedience. In your daily life, what might it look like to actually put into practice these definitions of stillness and knowledge?

- If we are honest, many of us don’t find it easy to be still and “wait on God.” We keep taking on responsibilities and trying to accomplish more and more in our own strength. Yet many faithful followers of God who have gone before us learned to live life with a keen awareness of God’s perspective and our human frailty. What do you learn about “waiting on God” from the following testimonies of those who have gone before us?

The psalmist: “Take delight in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.” (Psalm 37:4–7)

The apostle Peter: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:6–7)

Jesus: “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:31–33)

The prophet Isaiah: “Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!” (Isaiah 30:18)

Closing Group Discovery Discussion

Not all of us make a practice of climbing mountains that envelop us in reminders of the God’s Eye View. Nevertheless, images of daily life can alert us to the God’s Eye View that we otherwise might dismiss. A car racing through an intersection against the light can remind us, in much the same way a lightning bolt can, how much we don’t control in our lives. A mass of commuters crowded onto a subway platform during rush hour can remind us, in much the same way a mountaintop view of distant hikers can, how small we really are. Which images in your daily world remind you of God’s command: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10)?

WRAP-UP (14 MINUTES)

DVD Wrap-up by Philip Yancey

Personal Reflection

It occurs to me, thinking about prayer, that most of the time I get the direction wrong. I start downstream with my own concerns and bring them to God. I inform God, as if God did not already know. I plead with God, as if hoping to change God's mind and overcome divine reluctance. Instead, I should start upstream where the flow begins.

When I shift direction, I realize that God already cares about my concerns—my uncle's cancer, world peace, a broken family, a rebellious teenager—more than I do. Grace, like water, descends to the lowest part. Streams of mercy flow. I begin with God, who bears primary responsibility for what happens on earth.

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Using the image of trickling drops of water that collect and begin flowing in an ever-widening stream down the mountains, Philip encourages us to reflect on the God's Eye View and use it as a starting point for prayer. During this time of quiet, pray silently, using the following outline as a guide. This exercise will help prepare you to pray together as a group at the close of this session.



Start at the top, the high snowfield where God is.

- Reflect on who you are as a person of eternal destiny created in God's image. Make necessary corrections and confession to renew an open relationship with God.
- Meditate on who God is. Thank and praise God for being the loving, faithful Creator who continues to care for the vast, created universe. Thank and praise God for what has been given to you.

Shift your image of God's love and blessing to the trickles of water that join together and begin to form small pools and alpine ponds.

- Realizing that God already cares about the people you know and love, pray for those closest to you—your relatives, neighbors, friends—and picture God's grace and blessing flowing down into their lives.

Imagine the flow of God's love and blessings growing wider and deeper, overflowing the pond and racing down the mountainside in a gurgling stream.

- Pray for distant relatives, people in need, and national concerns and issues that are important to you such as homelessness, genocide, children of AIDS, impoverished people in your community, and so on.

Turn your gaze to the image of a vast reservoir of water.

- Imagine the whole scope of God's involvement in the world and pray about the work God is doing everywhere. Join with others to extend the widening circle of God's love to those who have not yet experienced it. Pray about your place in accomplishing God's work and, as Jesus commanded in Matthew 5:44, pray for your enemies—those who persecute you or make your life difficult.

Group Prayer

When doubts creep in and I wonder whether prayer is a sanctified form of talking to myself, I remind myself that the Son of God, who had spoken worlds into being and sustains all that exists, felt a compelling need to pray. He prayed as if it made a difference, as if the time he devoted to prayer mattered every bit as much as the time he devoted to caring for people.

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Begin by praying aloud verses 8–13 of Psalm 145:

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All your works praise you, LORD; your faithful people extol you. They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.

Using the same images you used during your personal reflection time, continue to pray about your concerns and God's work in the world. Focus on:

- The trickles of your personal concerns
- God's grace and blessing flowing into the lives of those close to you
- The widening stream of needs in the world that are close to the heart of God
- The vast reservoir of God's divine work in the universe

PERSONAL JOURNEY: TO DO ON YOUR OWN

Prayer has become for me much more than a shopping list of requests to present to God. It has become a realignment of everything. I pray to restore the truth of the universe, to gain a glimpse of the world, and of me, through the eyes of God. In prayer I shift my point of view away from my own natural selfishness. I climb above timberline and look down at the speck that is myself. I gaze at the stars and recall what role I or any of us play in a universe beyond comprehension. Prayer is the act of seeing reality from God's point of view.

Prayer, p. 29

Bible Discovery

As Philip shared in this session, prayer helps him regain sight of God's perspective on things; it restores his vision of life to one that more resembles God's. God longs to do the same for each of us. So take some time out from the busy demands of your life and accept God's invitation to be still, to be reminded of who God is, and to respond in light of God's perspective on the universe.

Read the following verses and meditate on what they say about God and how that relates to your concerns and priorities. Feel free to jot down some notes to help you remember how to focus on the God's Eye View whenever you approach God in prayer.

God as Creator

Nehemiah 9:6

Amos 4:13

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The faithful and compassionate heart of God

Psalm 33:5

Psalm 106:1

Psalm 116:5

God's personal concern for individual people

2 Chronicles 16:9a

Psalm 33:13–15

Isaiah 40:28–29

John 3:16

God's awareness of our personal needs

Psalm 146:7

Matthew 6:25–26

God's commitment to act on our behalf and for our benefit

Deuteronomy 3:24

Isaiah 48:17

Our response to God

Jeremiah 9:24

SUPPLEMENTAL BIBLE DISCOVERY:

Praying for the Bigger Picture

Often the scope of our prayers is limited to what we want God to do for us. Yet God sees and acts in a realm far beyond our sight. Consider the following passages about personal prayers offered to God that in some way (perhaps unknown to the one who was praying) connected to the bigger picture of what God was doing. How did God respond? In what ways do these examples influence your desire to keep company with God through prayer?

1 Kings 18:22 - 24, 33 - 39

2 Kings 20:1 - 7; 2 Chronicles 32:27 - 31

Nehemiah 1:5 - 11; 2:4 - 8

Daniel 9:4 - 5, 17 - 19; 10:1 - 13

2 Corinthians 12:7 - 9

MY PRAYER JOURNAL

Prayer invites us to rest in the fact that God is in control, and the world's problems are ultimately God's, not ours. If I spend enough time with God, I will inevitably begin to look at the world with a point of view that more resembles God's own.

Prayer, p. 210



It's not easy to acknowledge God and, in Philip's words, "restore the truth of the universe." Each of us faces many distractions and the ongoing temptation to try to be like God rather than being still, getting to know God better, and trusting God to be God. Yet the practice of being still before God is the best way to renew our perspective on life.

Use the following pages to write down your thoughts and observations about prayer as well as the people, situations, concerns, aspirations, and needs for which you want to pray. Keep the God's Eye View in mind and give some thought as to where your prayer concerns fit within that broader perspective.

Blessed are those who make the LORD their trust.

PSALM 40:4

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Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you,
who walk in the light of your presence, LORD.

PSALM 89:15

Prayer helps correct myopia, calling to mind a perspective I daily forget. I keep reversing roles, thinking of ways in which God should serve me, rather than vice versa. . . . Prayer raises my sight beyond the petty . . . circumstances of daily life to afford a glimpse of that lofty perspective. I realize my tininess and God’s vastness, and the true relation of the two. In God’s presence, I feel small because I am small.

Prayer, pp. 21–22