

the third step

Vigorously pursue a deepening relationship with God, engaging in prayer and worship while remaining open to his response and leading

communication - the key to a thriving relationship

The quality of *any* relationship is largely determined by the quality of communication. This is true whether we are talking about relationships among families, neighbours, in the workplace or even on the international stage. In fact, communication is so important that we can hardly claim to be in a relationship at all, unless there is meaningful, on-going dialogue. Even in the family context, relationships are purely nominal if people are not really talking to each other. For example, if a husband speaks to his wife for just five minutes a day, and then only when he wants something, there is no relationship of any value. He has a marriage certificate, but he doesn't have a marriage. He may stay with his wife for convenience or for 'appearances', but the relationship effectively ended when the conversation ended.

What is true in human relationships is also true of our relationship with God. Meaningful communication, in which we are heard by - *and hear from* - God, is essential to our most important relationship. Certainly, if we spend just five minutes a day in prayer, only when we want something, we are not going to have a relationship with God. Common sense, the bible *and* the price Jesus paid tells us that.

Prayer is the key to a loving, powerful, intense relationship with God. Consistent prayer changes lives - in fact, it changes everything. It takes us directly into God's throne room, into the inner sanctum - into his very presence. In prayer we are drawn close, built up, instructed; we are *wooed* in prayer, we experience the joy of spiritual intimacy with our Father, we are *at one* with the creator of all things...but there is even more than that, as we shall see.

Just as there are different types of communication between people, there are different types of prayer - and each has an important role in our relationship with God. Before we look at them, let's just take a moment to consider the golden rule of effective prayer - **Never pray alone!**

Never pray alone. There is never any need to pray alone, because we never *are* alone. We have - living within us - the Holy Spirit of God. We have already submitted to his control over our lives, should we not seek his guidance when it matters most? We need the leading of the Holy Spirit *continuously*, so let's be sure that - when we pray - we remain open to his prompting. Intelligent, effective prayer most often comes from responding to the Holy Spirit, and this is especially true in *petitionary prayer* - that is, when we are asking God to intervene in situations. When we pray like this, we should be in agreement with God, have his perspective of the circumstances, and have his desire to see them change .

Petitionary prayer is one of the main elements of our communication with God, along with prayers of repentance, worship, thanksgiving, and praise. They are all important, but we will start by looking at repentance, because the others only become meaningful when we get this one right.

the prayer of repentance

Sin separates us from God. When we sin, we lose our sense of fellowship and oneness with him. We lose our *peace*, and we lose our joy. We will want to put this right, to be restored to that close relationship, and we do this through *repentance*. There are several aspects to a prayer of repentance. None of us should have any difficulty with the first one - it is that we *recognise we have sinned*. 1 John 1:8-9 has this to say on the subject of sin: *'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.'*

This is straightforward enough. We acknowledge our sin, confess it - and receive forgiveness and cleansing from God. But if we read a little further in 1 John, we come to this: *'No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No-one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him'* (1 John 3:6)... and in verse 9 of the same chapter, the same point is repeated. A casual reading of these verses might suggest we are in a no-win situation. If we say we do not sin, then 'the truth is not in us', *but if we are continuing to sin*, then God is not in us (1 John 3:9).

What is the difference between the one who is forgiven and cleansed, and the one who hasn't seen or known God? The difference is *repentance*.

Repentance is a deliberate turning *away* from sin and *towards* Jesus. It can only come from a knowledge of God, and a heartfelt recognition - and sorrow - that we have fallen short of his standards. The action associated with repentance is that we determine, with God's help, to do better. The actions associated with not knowing God, (in chapter three) are that people *keep on sinning* (v.6) *continue to sin*, and *go on sinning* (v.9). Here, we are not looking at occasional lapses, however grave or damaging - we are actually looking at a state of *perpetual rebellion*. We, however, *have* a relationship with God, and while that does not mean we will never sin again, it does mean that - when we do - we can truly repent and be forgiven.

We recognise our sin and, being truly sorry, we want forgiveness and change - so we *confess*. Yet there is one more aspect we must address when we come before God in repentance. In seeking God's forgiveness, we have to be free with our own. We are all familiar with the 'Lord's Prayer' - *'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us'* or, as it says in Matthew 6:12, 'forgive us our debts' and... 'debtors'. What is perhaps less well known, is what Jesus said immediately after he taught this best-known and much loved prayer: *'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins.'* (Matthew 6:14-15)

There have been many sermons written on the Lord's prayer (sometimes on just one line of it) but the only concept Jesus chose to expand on is this relationship between forgiving others and God's forgiveness. It is *that* important. We will be going deeper into the subjects of both sin and forgiveness in later steps, but for now we need to be very clear on this point: *Our forgiveness from God depends on our forgiveness of others*. When we have first forgiven others, we can approach God in the certainty of being forgiven ourselves - *the very moment* we confess and truly repent.

prayers of petition - asking our Father to intervene

Prayers of petition cover everything that we ever ask of God, and in that sense include praying for forgiveness. We are going to see how our prayers of petition can be dynamic and fruitful, but first let's consider this: *The vast majority of petitionary prayers produce no apparent results whatsoever*.

Of course, much 'unanswered' prayer is really *answered* prayer - the answer being 'no' or 'not yet'... but there are sometimes other reasons why prayer seems to fail. Let's look at a few of the problems:

- **Lack of faith.**
- **Personal unrighteousness.**
- **Wrong motivation.**

We are far enough into this programme to see the connection between these difficulties - they are all *relationship issues*. They are 'symptoms' rather than causes. Our commitment to Christ - our *active* faith, our willingness to repent, our motivation to put God first - should rule out 'unanswered' prayer, at least on these grounds. As our relationship develops, and we become more attuned to the leading of the Holy Spirit, we will come to see positively answered prayer increasingly as the norm. Many of our petitionary prayers will be motivated by God himself - his *invitation* to those who love him to really make a difference. Not that God needs our help or encouragement to do what is right... it is we who need to be part of what *he* is doing. That he includes us in his plans, and entrusts us with important service, tells us much about his love and the value he places on his creation. *Agreeing with God* in prayer, and seeing him take action, is deeply fulfilling. We are designed, not just to do it - but to *enjoy* it.

praying 'in the name of Jesus'

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." (John 14:14)

Jesus made this sensational promise to the first disciples, and it is as true for us as it was for them. But what does it really mean to ask in the name of Jesus? We need to know that, because we want to pray effectively, and we also want to avoid disappointment. First, what it *doesn't* mean. It doesn't mean just tagging 'in Jesus' name' on the end of our prayers. It's not 'abracadabra' or 'open sesame'. To pray in Jesus' name is to ask for what *he* would ask for, in agreement with God and in faith. It is similar to a 'power of attorney', where one person empowers another to act in their name. To illustrate, Mr. Smith gives power of attorney to Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones then has access to all the resources of Mr. Smith, but only because he is trusted to use them in accordance with Mr. Smith's will. Mr. Jones must use these resources in the way Mr. Smith would himself, acting only in Mr. Smith's interest.

Asking in the name of Jesus is God's 'power of attorney'. It is granted only to those who love and obey Christ, and can only be used for his purposes. It is an incredible privilege which comes to us as a result of our relationship with him. As we go deeper into that relationship, as we begin to see things through his eyes, we will find ourselves naturally asking in the name of Christ - *because we will want to happen, what he wants to happen.*

The bible tells us that *'the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective'* (James 3:16). Real faith, real repentance and a love of God puts us in that category. Even when we don't have a specific leading for our prayers, we can generally pray in God's will because our relationship with him gives us some understanding of his nature. Generally, but not always. Sometimes, we can pray for something which seems entirely in keeping with God's will, only to find that he doesn't give us what we request. We need to know why that happens, because we need to respond correctly when it does. It is simply a question of priorities...

a thorn in the flesh

Most of our petitionary prayers, if we follow the New Testament model, will be in support of our Christian brothers and sisters. Some prayers will be for ourselves. Often, these will be centered on spiritual matters - as we seek to conform more closely to the image of Christ, and to effectively carry out his will. Yet there may be times we find ourselves in dire need of God's intervention in a very practical sense. For example - we (or a loved one) might become ill; we may suffer from depression, or perhaps be hurt in some other way. Christians are not immune from the consequences of living in a fallen, damaged world. There is always suffering - and the experiences of people such as Paul the apostle and other early Christians, bear witness to this fact. Paul himself endured many things, but one of the situations he is known to have prayed about was something he referred to as a 'thorn in his flesh'. There has been much speculation as to what the problem was, but what matters is God's response to it. Paul prayed three times for help, and God replied, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Why didn't God remove the problem? *Because God had a better plan!* And *what* a plan - to *perfect* his power in Paul's weakness. God always has a plan, a plan to bless us extravagantly - a plan to bring us into spiritual maturity, even to the very likeness of his son. Sometimes God will intervene to take away problems - *if* that is what is really best for us. But God is concerned with 'the big picture'. He wants us to attain the full measure of Christ. *That* is God's priority, and often it is in suffering that we progress most rapidly. Our time on earth is insignificant compared to eternity, but what *is* vitally important about this life is how we respond to God, how close we walk with him, and how much we are changed .

Among other things, the bible tells us that suffering produces perseverance, that those who suffer are "*done with sin*" (1 Peter 4:1) and that they are "*heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ*" (Romans 8:17). Both 1 Peter and Romans tell us to *rejoice* in suffering, and the reason we should is found in Romans 8:28 - "*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*"

Put simply, there is nothing that can happen to us that God cannot use for our benefit, however it may seem. If God doesn't change our circumstances, it is only because there is something better on offer. It might be an opportunity to be profoundly changed, or perhaps to learn to trust him whatever is going on. God is with us when we are in trouble - on every occasion, he will either bring a practical remedy or give us the opportunity in that situation to become more like Jesus...either way, it will be a *real* answer to prayer.

Fruitful petitionary prayers depend on faith, righteousness, hearing from God and praying according to his will (in Jesus' name). They should be presented with *thanksgiving* (Philippians 4:6), for what we have previously received and what we expect to receive. We may need to persevere, and fasting (abstaining from food for a time) is sometimes practised by Christians wishing to underline their commitment to their petitions. In meeting God's requirements, we can expect our prayers to be answered - though perhaps not always *in the way* we expect! God loves us passionately. Let's *trust* him to provide the right answers, whatever the questions are - and let's rejoice when he has a better plan than that which seems obvious to us.

worship, praise and thanksgiving

Worship, praise and thanksgiving are closely related. Perhaps a good working definition of worship is 'a heart-felt response, planned or spontaneous, to the awesome nature of God'. Praise might be described as a similar response to the great works he has done, and thanksgiving as praise for those works of God that affect us on the everyday level. Just as prayers of petition and repentance communicate our *needs* to God, worship, praise and

thanksgiving communicate our *feelings* - our love and gratitude for who he is and what he has done. The expression of feelings is important in all our relationships, and that is especially true in our relationship with God. In considering why it is so important, we will concentrate on *worship*, because an understanding of this will naturally give us an insight into (and the right attitude towards) praise and thanksgiving.

worship - a gift from God

Our 'heart-felt response to God' can take many forms. Worship is most often thought of in terms of prayer and singing, but a broader perspective might include any act of obedience or service which is prompted by our love of God. Whatever form it takes, genuine worship is one of the most uplifting and beneficial activities we can ever engage in. The ability to worship - in spirit and in truth - (John 4:23) is one of God's greatest gifts. The invitation to worship is the invitation to come directly into the presence of God, to be united in spirit with him - to touch the eternal. It is the invitation to experience his love even as we give him ours, to be more fulfilled, more complete, and more in love with him. We are *designed* to worship - not because God needs anything from us - but because *in his presence is everything we need!*

Whether worship is planned, spontaneous or prompted by the Holy Spirit, it should always be a demonstration of our feelings towards God. Feelings often follow thoughts, and when we consistently dwell on the nature of God - as revealed to us through his Spirit, his Word and our own personal experience - we will find ourselves drawn to spontaneous worship. We will also be ready to fully engage in church worship, if we prepare ourselves first by giving some thought to the characteristics of God - his boundless love for us, his perfect justice, his immeasurable power, wisdom and knowledge, for a few examples. Worship services are for the Christian community to come together *in righteousness*, with the common purpose of expressing their feelings for God and enjoying his presence. They are not held to inspire worship - we bring the worship with us. We come having already spent time in prayer and in reverence for the nature of God.

Sincere worship is powerful. It could hardly be otherwise, for the worshipper touches - and is touched by - the divine. But it has to come from the heart. Anything less is both meaningless *and* unproductive. Here is what Jesus has to say about 'going through the motions' in worship: "*These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain...*" (Mark 7:6-7). We, however, have faith, love and a relationship with God that enables us to be genuine worshippers - with all that means for ourselves, and for those whose lives will be touched by God working through us.

Worship is a *lifestyle*. We don't just acknowledge the wonders of God's nature in prayer and song - we *reflect* that nature in our everyday lives. The apostle Paul urges his readers to "*...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship.*" (Romans 12:1) What does that mean? It means that living out the commitment we have made is a 'spiritual act of worship'. It makes perfect sense. What greater homage can we pay to God than to make him Lord of every part of our lives? Remaining in harmony with God, in obedience and in love, is a continual act of worship - an on-going acknowledgement of who he is and what he means to us.

Praise God!

Just as worship is communicating our love for God, so praise is expressing our feelings for what he has done, and what he continues to do. Praise, like worship, is entirely for our benefit. In praise we enter God's presence, we give and receive love - our relationship deepens. Heart-felt praise is a glorious experience, that we can (and should) have everyday.

We will never run out of things to praise God for, because everything he has ever done is praiseworthy - and he has done rather a lot! We may marvel at the vastness and complexity of Creation, and the beauty we find in it - the animal kingdom, with all its variety, from ferocious to fluffy; strange plants, bizarre rock formations, planets and stars - and then there is *us*. Humanity, - the fusion of spirit, mind and body - given life, free will and the ability to love. We were given dominion over the rest of creation... and when we turned our backs on our Maker, then he gave us himself. Jesus - teacher, saviour, redeemer, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, suitor, brother and friend - Jesus came to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. But when Jesus had completed his work for us, the giving didn't stop. God gave himself again - through his Holy Spirit - to every believer. The only difficulty we should have with praise is choosing where to start!

Praise can often be spontaneous, being a natural reaction to recognising God's craftsmanship. It is also good to deliberately consider some aspect of what God has accomplished, because this leads to praise. The same is true of dwelling on God's nature, in relation to worship. Imagine this: Two people in a relationship love each other, and one of them spends a bit of time thinking about the other's wonderful nature. Not only that, but this person also dwells on all the good things the other has done. Result - this person will really get in touch with the love they already have, and will express their feelings to their partner. Their partner will respond in kind, and the relationship deepens. It's a little different with God, and much more rewarding. When we come to God in praise and worship, he is already passionate about us - he couldn't love us more...but we *experience* that love more deeply. In these intimate times *our* love grows, *we* grow and *the relationship* grows. *We are changed*, too. Our character increasingly reflects *his* character, as we spend time with our loving Father.

Thank God!

Communicating our gratitude to God is more than just good manners. In acknowledging his provision for us, we are also recognising the love from which that provision flows. Not only that, we are re-affirming our *dependence* on him. There is nothing we have, there is nothing we *are*, that hasn't come from God - and an understanding of that dependence will give us a proper perspective of thanksgiving. It is the key to the 'attitude of gratitude'. Put simply, when we are free of the idea that - somehow - our own *personal merit* is a major factor in achievement, we are then free to give credit where it *is* due. For example, the only merit we have in holding down a job, passing exams or sharing the gospel is merely that we have applied the abilities God has given us. It is the same principle as the salvation process - God gives us the faith, and all we do is act upon it. We can rejoice in that faith, and the salvation it brings, but we need to remember how we came by it - and be thankful for it. We all have abilities and talents, but they are *gifts*. The most we can ever claim is that we put these gifts to good use. It is natural to be thankful when specific prayers are answered, but God's provision covers *everything*, so let's reflect that fact in our thanksgiving.

Giving thanks focuses us on God's loving provision and our dependence. These are relationship issues, and just as in praise and worship, we can be greatly blessed in our relationship when we enter his presence to give thanks. Showing gratitude is for *our* benefit. Perhaps that is why 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says this: "*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" Whatever is going on in our lives, we can be sure that time spent with God is a blessing. We can also be sure that there is always something to be grateful for, and that (as we saw in the petitionary prayer section) all things, even 'bad' things, work for the good of those who love him. Let's make a point of dwelling on what God has done for us, and regularly expressing our gratitude.

Making it work - A summary of how to engage in effective prayer and worship

1. Repentance. We need to...

- *Recognise we have sinned*
- *Be truly sorry*
- *Want forgiveness*
- *Forgive others.*
- *Confess*
- *Turn away from sin - and turn towards Jesus.*

2. Petition. We need to have...

- *Faith*
- *Righteousness.*
- *Unselfish motives*
- *God's leading*
- *'Power of attorney' - (asking in Jesus' name)*
- *An understanding that God's answers are always best, however they may seem to us*

3. Worship, praise and thanksgiving. Remember that they are...

- *Gifts from God for our benefit - to build us up in relationship with him*
- *Sincere - 'heart-felt' responses to our loving Father*
- *Planned, spontaneous or led by the Holy Spirit*
- *A daily way of living that produces dynamic Christianity*

We have seen that communication - through prayer and worship - is essential to our relationship with God. It is the means he will use to make that relationship and our lives reach their fullest potential in Christ. Every joyful, fulfilled and powerful man and woman of God is a man or woman committed to prayer and worship. There are no exceptions, because they are not only the hallmarks of a quality relationship with God, they are also *the reason for it*.

The third step is:

Vigorously pursue a deepening relationship with God through communication, engaging in prayer and worship, whilst remaining open to His response and leading

We should now understand the importance of this, and how it can change our lives. If you are ready to make this a daily priority, and commit yourself to regular prayer and worship, you may like to consider the following prayer:

Almighty God,

I thank you for the relationship we have, that Jesus made possible. I thank you, too, that - through prayer and worship - I may regularly come into your presence and receive from you. I want a deep relationship with you, and I want experience everything you have for me. I therefore commit myself to prayer and worship, making our times together a meaningful, daily event.

I thank you in the name of Jesus, Amen.

The third step is continuous - we can never look back to when we 'did it', only to when we started doing it. If your 'vigorous pursuit' of a deeper relationship has started today, you will never be disappointed... but never be satisfied either, because *there is always more*.

comments and questions for the group meeting

the journal...continued

Morning Prayer

Before doing anything else, a short time of prayer containing the following elements: Thanks to God for who He is, what Jesus has done, and for His love and provision (including the new day). Commit the day to Him, asking for His protection and presence.

Through the day

Involve God in your daily life, seeking His guidance in situations as they arise, and endeavour to respond to people as you believe Jesus would.

In the evening

Set aside a little time, every evening, to pray, complete your journal and consider the readings. Prayer should include thanksgiving, repentance, prayer for others and for yourself - particularly that God's perfect will should be completely fulfilled in your life. Pray for each member of your group (by name). Matters arising through the day, personal situations or difficulties should also be brought before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, and be open to His leading.

Day One

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - 1 John 1: 8-9

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The quality of any relationship is largely determined by the quality of communication*

Day Two

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - John 14:14

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about.... *To pray in Jesus' name is to ask for what he would ask for, in agreement with God and in faith.*

Day Three

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - John 4:23-24

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *Remaining in harmony with God, in obedience and in love, is a continual act of worship - an on-going acknowledgement of who he is and what he means to us*

Day Four

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - 1 Thessalonians 5:18

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *We can be greatly blessed in our relationship with God when we enter his presence to give thanks. Showing gratitude is for our benefit*

Day Five

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible reading - Colossians 1: 9-14

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about.... *Prayer for each other can accomplish much, and will always increase love and unity. Let's do it!*

Day Six – The weekly review

In your relationship with God, what has been the highlight of the week?

What have you found most challenging or difficult?

Have you been aware of God's care for you this week?

Has God intervened in your life - answers to prayer etc.?

Have you been able to pray consistently throughout the week?

Can you think of any areas in your relationship with God that could be improved and, if so, how are you going to tackle them?

In times of trouble or temptation, how easy is it for you to seek the help of

a) God

b) other Christians?

What has been the most encouraging aspect of this past week?

The 'weekly review' is intended to bring our relationship with God into focus, and perhaps give us a little encouragement. Though it is for 'our eyes only', we can share aspects of it in the group - if we feel it might be beneficial to ourselves or others.

PREPARATION FOR THE FOURTH SESSION

Please prepare for the fourth session by *prayerfully* reading the next chapter, noting down any comments or questions that you'd like to bring up in the group