

Week 3:

Experiencing the Holy Spirit in Prayer

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Introduction

We make time at the end of every Small Group meeting to invite the Holy Spirit to move and work in us, bringing the change and growth we need as Jesus' disciples. Throughout the bible discussion, the Holy Spirit is revealing truth to us, convicting us of sin, and encouraging us in our weaknesses and struggles. During prayer time, we expect him to come and empower us to overcome sin, receive healing, and bring encouragement. In this session, we will talk about what the prayer ministry time in Small Group should look like and how to lead it well.

1. Our Approach to Prayer Ministry in Small Group

Our Small Group prayer ministry time is based on priorities in prayer that we observe in the bible. Jesus is the model for how to pray effectively for others. As we observe the practices of Jesus and his disciples, we develop convictions about an approach to praying for others that will allow us to cooperate with God and learn to experience his empowering presence. Some biblical practices and priorities are:

a. Devotion to Private Prayer

Luke 5:16 tell us that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Jesus' effectiveness in his public ministry began in these private moments with God. Similarly, if we would see God move in the "public" gatherings of the Small Group, we must be people of private prayer. God will often bring prophetic encouragement and direction during these times alone with him. As we approach the group night, we will find ourselves filled with faith rather than drained by the demands of life. (Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35, Luke 9:18, Acts 10:9)

b. Belief that God will Act in the Moment

Biblical prayer is driven by faith that we serve a God who actually responds as we call out to him. Many people have an experience with prayer that leads them to lack expectation. When we look at the bible though, we see a very different kind of prayer with greater expectations. We want to pray in Small Group with the expectation that God will show up in our midst to do his work. (Mark 11:24, Acts 4:31, 8:17, James 5:16)

c. The Laying on of Hands

The laying on of hands was a regular part of the prayer ministry of Jesus and his disciples. It is named among the "elementary doctrines" of Hebrews 6. As believers who are filled with the Holy Spirit pray for others, the experience of the Spirit's empowering presence comes upon those for whom they pray. We expect to see this power through hands-on prayer as a normal part of the Small Group gathering. (Luke 4:40, Acts 6:6, 19:6, 1 Timothy 4:14, 2 Timothy 1:6, Hebrews 6:2)

d. Compassion-Driven Prayer

It can be very tempting to make prayer ministry more about ourselves and the benefit we experience in being used by God. If we begin to pray with a concern for our own reputation, we will be departing from the biblical motivation for prayer. Jesus models the proper heart motivation for us; he was “filled with compassion” as he prayed for people. (Mark 1:41, Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 20:34, Luke 7:13)

2. Preparing for Prayer Ministry in Small Group

How effective you will be at leading prayer time begins long before you start to pray over the group. You must remain connected to God and to your group members in order to approach the Small Group prayer ministry time with faith and expectation.

a. Stay Connected to God

Develop a regular time of personal prayer, bible reading and worship. Spend time each day praying for individual group members. Ask God what he is doing in them and what he has next for them. Consider what they are going through and how you might encourage them (Colossians 4:12). Write down things that God may be saying, running those through the grid of 1 Corinthians 14:3 – would this be “for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation?”

b. Stay Connected to Group Members

While regular prayer for group members will help you feel connected to them, time spent with group members will help them feel connected to you. Be open with them. Do they know your story and some of your struggles? Do you know theirs? Have they grown to trust you? As group members are around you, they will be able to feel the genuineness of your love for them and will be able to tell that you have been praying for them which will increase the effectiveness of the Small Group prayer ministry time.

c. Stir Expectation for Group Night

Expectation for group night will be the natural result of time spent with God and with group members. Still, the worries, fears, and distractions of life have a way of draining our faith as we approach the night. Time spent in prayer, either alone or with core members, right before the Small Group meeting will help to remind you of God’s goodness and power. Ask someone to pray for you if you feel drained or discouraged as you approach the Small Group meeting!

3. Leading Prayer Ministry Time

Be intentional to lead the Small Group through prayer time. An effective prayer ministry time will require a great deal of leadership in order to help people participate well. Don't assume that the group will know how to listen, wait, and take risks. Guide them along.

a. Allow enough time for prayer ministry

One of the most common mistakes a group leader can make is to spend too much time in discussion and not leave adequate time for prayer. We tend to feel more in control of the discussion and we place too much value on what we can accomplish through our words. While a good discussion is very important, it is a great mistake to overvalue it so much that we leave no room for God to work in prayer. Be sure to allow at least a half hour for prayer at the end of discussion. You will probably spend 3-5 minutes explaining the prayer ministry time and 3-5 more inviting the Holy Spirit to work before people begin praying for one another.

b. Walk the Small Group through what prayer time will look like

An effective leader is constantly communicating with vision. Group members will be helped tremendously as they understand why we do what we do. You must continue to say these kinds of things week after week in order to help people understand and remember why we pray in this way.

1. Begin by explaining why we pray after bible discussion. *We're going to spend some time seeking God in prayer now. We don't want to just talk about these things and not act on them. We pray to ask God for help – to help us deal with issues that came up during discussion, to change or heal us, to empower or refresh us. He's real and he's good and as we seek him together, he meets us.*
2. Give them specific leadership and direction about how to participate. You want people to focus on God and be engaged during prayer time. Walk the group through what that looks like. *I'm going to start to pray for us now. Close your eyes and focus your attention on God. I'll invite the Holy Spirit to come and we'll see what he'll do.*
3. Help them understand how to receive prayer. Just as with participation in bible discussion, people will often begin by asking for prayer about surface level matters ("I have a test tomorrow") or about other people ("Pray for my aunt's surgery"). Encourage people to seek God for their real issues. Pray for the things they share but go beyond those things as you listen for the things God really wants to get at.
4. What about corporate prayer? During this time in the Small Group meeting, the group leader will be leading the group in prayer but others may feel like they are supposed to pray as well. Corporate prayer during this time will often tend to distract from what the Holy Spirit is doing. Rather than opening the whole group up

to corporate prayer, the group leader should lead others in the group to simply receive. *You don't have to pray out loud during this time. Just receive. Focus your attention on God and seek him. I'll pray over us and then we'll begin to pray individually for those who would like prayer.*

c. Make this time non-threatening for guests

You want to be mindful of people who are newer to the group or have come from different church backgrounds. Many have never been around this kind of prayer before and we would like to help them feel comfortable and at ease.

1. Briefly explain that our practice is biblical. This helps to put people at ease. *We do this because we see clearly in the bible that God's people pray for one another.*
2. Give everyone options. *No one has to give or receive prayer if they don't want to. If you aren't praying for someone or receiving prayer, you can just close your eyes and talk privately with God or listen to the music.*

d. Invite the Holy Spirit

After all of the vision-casting about what the what, why, and how of prayer ministry, the group leader is finally ready to pray. Begin by inviting the Holy Spirit.

1. The first step is simply to wait! The discipline and humility required for waiting on the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction is incredibly important when leading a group in prayer ministry. We want to see what God wants to do! This means we must learn to be silent and fight our natural urge to fill the silence with our own words.
2. As you're waiting, listen! We believe that God will prompt and lead us in what he is doing in the moment. We consider direction that we hear or feel – is it biblical? Is it understandable? Is it encouraging? We are not trying to be psychic, probing for deep secrets. When there is no clear leading from the Holy Spirit in specifics, you should pray what you know from the bible. Hopefully the discussion was prepared and led in a way that naturally provides topics to pray about.
3. As you are waiting and listening for direction, the final step is to risk. Respond in faith and act on things that God seems to be leading. Sometimes responding in faith comes with feeling uncertain. It's okay to be wrong. We share and pray in humility, knowing that our hearing is subjective. We are tentative in our sharing and we preface it with "I feel like God may be saying..." rather than "God says..."

e. Transition to praying for each other

After praying over the group, transition to prayer ministry time. Remember that you are leading this portion of prayer time too. Give a brief explanation of what you want them to do. Here are some things the leader should be doing during this time.

1. Direct your core to pray. Directing your core begins well before the group night begins. Core members should know to move to praying for individuals as they feel led, before you specify that it's time to pray for people. If they haven't started on their own and you see someone who needs prayer, discreetly direct one of your core members to them. Encourage an inexperienced person to help pray with (and receive training from) a more experienced prayer.
2. Go pray for someone yourself. Hopefully core members have already started praying for people as you are still praying over the group. When you feel done praying over the group, find someone who you are training in prayer and ask them if they would help as you pray for someone else in the group.
3. Be aware of what is happening. Often things will be happening during prayer ministry time that will require a leader's attention. Whether validating someone's experience or helping a new person process what is going on, be attentive to what is happening and take appropriate action to care for and help all the people. Occasionally there may be significant distractions (excessive emotion, demonic manifestations, panic attacks, etc.) that require more decisive action on the part of the group leader. Explain what is happening in a way that helps the whole group without embarrassing an individual.

f. End prayer time

At some point at or before the official end time of the meeting, the leader will have to make an announcement that group is over. You should encourage continued prayer and conversation as appropriate but let people know they are free to leave.

Conclusion

We long for Small Group meetings where relevant discussions are followed by encounters with the Living God in prayer. When that is happening consistently, people will be saved, disciples will mature, leaders will emerge, groups will multiply, and the church will experience joy! Along the way, we can't lose sight of the fact that Small Group is more than a meeting. In order to live out Christian faith in community in a way that resembles the bible, we must prioritize real relationships that transcend Small Group meetings. We turn to that topic in our final session.

Sample Bible Discussion for Practical Training

THIS IS ONLY A SAMPLE. This discussion should not be used verbatim. It is meant as an example to illustrate how to write a bible discussion. You must soak on the text and write your own questions in order to lead a helpful and relevant discussion.

Vision for Small Group – We come to Small Group expecting to meet with God and be changed by him. That is part of the reason why praying for each other about the things we’re discussing is so important.

Announcements

Topic – Experiencing the Holy Spirit in Prayer

Main Point – We should seek God in prayer with faith that he will answer on the spot.

Icebreaker – Say your name and briefly tell about an event you attended that was unusually powerful or you felt a great “energy” in the place (concert, sporting event, theater, etc).

-OR-

Introduction Question – When was a time that you felt desperate for God to come through in some way or rescue you from something?

Read Acts 4:23-31 and Pray

Question 1 – (v. 23-28) These disciples have experienced hardship but believe that God is sovereign, meaning he created everything that exists (v. 24) and oversees all the events of history (v. 25-28). Their beliefs about who God is informed how they prayed to him. What is an example of a belief that you hold about God that informs how you pray?

Question 2 – (v. 29-30) Sometimes we pray for things that require little faith but in this story, the believers make a bold request. A bold prayer is one that will only be answered by a dramatic move of God. What are some of the boldest things you’ve prayed for?

Question 3 – (v. 31) There is a tangible experience of God’s power as the place where they were meeting was shaken. What do you think you would have felt if you were there?

Question 4 – (v. 31) Their request for boldness (v. 29) was answered on the spot (v. 31). What would you like God to answer on the spot tonight?

Prayer Ministry – Pray for boldness in evangelism, an experience of God’s presence, or help with something on the spot tonight.