**Week 1 Prayer Research** *How the Spirit Shapes Prayer*

**1. About Spiritual Journeys**

" They publicly said evil things about the Journey of the Lord." Acts 19: 9

When I was interviewing for a position at Fuller Seminary, I was invited to talk about my spiritual journey. I had never encountered that question before. I don't remember what I said. I did get the position. Ever since, I have felt challenged to explore spiritual journeys with others.

I probably answered that interview question by reviewing my journey through Lutheran churches and schools—kind of like a resume. Once I was in that Evangelical seminary community, I learned that the journey of interest was my relationship with God over the years of my life—when I felt close to him and when I felt far. Where am I in that relationship now and where would I like to be in the future?

I offer here short, one-page devotions specifically for Royal Redeemer participants. Consider them to be Spiritual Journey Discoveries. I have been intrigued for decades. I like books and have shelves of them on the general topic of spiritual formation. That is the current category for how to be drawn closer to God. This topic has many old classics. Spirituality is now a hot topic with many authors in the last several decades. I would like to draw on recent writings to share their discoveries with you.

A major discovery for me was Ephesians 4: 13. It is Paul's assignment to church leaders to build up the body of Christ until "we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ." What is the fulness of Christ and how do we grow into it?

To become mature really means to become all we are meant to be. Maturity in Christ is not something we attain in this life. It is a term of movement. We are always on the way to something more. Life in Christ is a spiritual journey. Join me in discovering what that journey involves.

**Prayer Thoughts:** *Dear God, open my eyes to recognize my own personal journey toward attaining the fulness of Christ. Send your Spirit to sharpen my appetite for being drawn closer to you.*

**2. I Want To Improve My Prayer Life**

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with, and he with me* (Rev. 3:19)

The one who knocks is the Christ figure, who has a message for the seven church near Ephesus. We should recognize him as Christ's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit frequently knocks on the door to the heart of every believer. The knocks are thoughts and questions, to which he draws our attention. When we respond with continued thoughts, we open the door to the conversation this is the essence of our prayer relationship with God.

Four out of five average Lutherans want to improve their prayer life. This is a discovery I made in a major survey research project on prayer *(How the Spirit Shapes Prayer*). I was surprised. Maybe you are, too.

This personal experience of Spirit-initiated conversation is different from the approach traditional Protestant churches feature. For them prayer is usually featured as a duty to be fulfilled in the life of discipleship Christians are called to live. Prayer is something we initiate, with the encouragement to read and remember set prayers that cover life's concerns.

What difference does it make who initiates the prayer relationship—the Spirit or the human believer? Is prayer something we do for God or an interaction the Spirit does for us.

The difference, I believe, is in the quality of the prayer experience. When we depend on ourselves to offer prayer to God, we are likely to repeat the same patterns and words, as if such holy words have little relationship to our daily lives. Some who pray with this routine find comfort in it. Others, like myself, get bored and have to force ourselves to do such routines that bring me little personal satisfaction and growth. Guilt is seldom a good motivator in church life.

**Prayer Thoughts:** *Lord, help me figure out my personal prayer life. Send your Spirit to open my eyes to new insights about my relationship with you. Bless my personal spiritual journey to becoming more life Christ.*

**3. Finding Rest**

*Come unto me, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11.28*

Christian writer Terry Much expresses a common teaching about personal prayer: "The ease of satisfying want and whim is what makes prayer so difficult. Prayer, the essence of which is obedience and submission, runs counter to a culture where we are beholden to very few."

I challenge this pessimistic, guilt-inducing understanding of personal prayer. I think the relationship between material abundance and personal prayer goes in the opposite direction. Because we live in such a materialistic society, many for looking for more than just getting the possessions that are advertised so aggressively in our culture.

In the data of my research of prayer practices of ordinary Christians (*How The Spirit Shapes Prayer*), I discovered that "asking God for material things I need" is clearly the least frequent practice. Less than one out of five checked that he or she usually did this.

In fact, four out of five said that in their prayers, they usually thank God for his blessings, ask God to forgive their sins, and ask for guidance in making decision. These prayer activities look very much like substantive spiritual engagement to me.

Slightly more than half agreed that personal prayer is the "most satisfying experience in my life." This is a purposely extreme statement. For them their time in prayer is a very satisfying experience, clearly something beyond just doing their duty. Half reported that they regularly experience a deep sense of peace and felt the strong presence of God in their prayers.

Is prayer something a good Christian "has to do"? Guilt is seldom a good motivator in churches. Rather, personal prayer is something a believer "get to do" because of the personal benefits and satisfaction he or she experiences.

**Prayer Thoughts:** *My Lord, help me review in my mind the times I have experienced a deep sense of peace in my prayers. Send your Spirit to shape my prayers into a time of deep personal satisfaction.*

**Week 2 More Prayer Research 4. Conversational Prayer**

*The Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.* Romans 8: 26

In my prayer research eighty-five percent reported that regularly pray in their own words. Twenty-three percent read from a book of prayers.

The first approach is conversational prayer, putting your own thoughts into your own words, just as you do with family or friends. When those who do some of the praying informally are added to those who do all such praying, the total who do conversational prayer totals 95 percent.

Reading from a book of prayers is formal in that thoughts follow prewritten words in a preselected reading. This is the way prayer is often taught. From my own heritage, I have a book of prayers a pastor gave to my uncle at his confirmation many years ago.

My mother's explanation for this custom was the assumption that these fourteen-years-old youngsters would probably not say their prayers right, so it was better to use a book. When I first started teaching conversational prayer, an elderly pastor's wife blurted out, "But does that count?" She reflected the assumption that there is right way and anything else is wrong. Of course, there is no wrong way to pray.

One of the respondents reported that she is trying to establish a prayer routine but finds immense satisfaction wit the informal prayer she does, talking to God as she would to a friend. What would make her apologetic for what she already finds very satisfying?

At bed time parents of ask their children, Have you said your prayers? A better question would be Have you talked with God today? This would avoid basic misunderstandings about the nature of prayer.

**Prayer Thoughts:** *Father, send your Spirit to quicken my heart so that I have many conversations with you throughout my day. Teach me to talk with you as a friend.*

**5. Prayer As Short Expressions**

Many of the great teachers of the Christian church subscribed to the principle that "frequent short prayers are of more worth than fewer lengthy prayers." Donald Bloesch supports this conclusion with these observations:

Fifth-century Augustin preferred the "very brief, quickly dispatched prayers" that characterized the spirituality of the desert fathers."

Thirteenth-century Thomas Aquinas held that frequency, not length, is the important issue in prayer. Frequent short prayers are of more worth than fewer lengthy prayers.

Sixteenth-century Martin Luther recommended that our prayer times be numerous but short in duration. Those who pray should say "brief prayer pregnant with spirit." "The fewer the words the better that prayer. Few words and much meaning is Christian. Many words and little meaning is pagan."

Seventh century Jacob Boehme gave this advice: "Many words are not needed, but only a believing, repentant soul."

Nineteenth-century Dwight Moody carried the principle to public prayer. He acknowledged the need for constant prayer in the privacy of one's heart. "A man who prays much in private will make short prayers in public. He regarded lengthy public prayers as something akin to religious pretensions.

Twentieth century Donald Bloesch concluded, "Lengthy prayers are not to be ruled out altogether in the Christian life, but they should be considered more the exception than the rule. What characterized the great saints was not so much involvement in one single protracted prayer or the endless repetition of prayer formulas as the practice of constantly waiting on the Lord, of praying inwardly even when outwardly occupied in daily tasks.

**Prayer Thoughts:** *My God, teach me to value short prayer thoughts as I go about my routines. Give me confidence that my conversation with you is more important than what others think I should do.*

**6. Growth in Prayer**

*After you have suffered a little while, God will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.* 1 Peter 5:10

In my prayer research twelve respondents on their own wrote that their prayer life had changed. Some had a specific time in mind. Curious, I called each to find out what happened. I had some delightful conversations with Christians who were eager to share their spiritual journey.

Six had a date in mind because that was a time of personal crisis that drove them to prayer. The other six reflected on spiritual growth and had a time in mind because they became involved increased prayer activity through interaction with others. I found myself cheering for the church life of interaction with others.

One mentioned a time when her actions nearly brought her marriage to an end. " I barely whispered, 'God, please help me." That was the beginning for me" Another had a difficult pregnancy that was finally terminated for medical reasons. Before, nothing caused her to rely on God. Then she learned what it meant to put her life situation into God's hands and leave the future to him. Yet another realized the importance of prayer when her husband had a medical emergency while away on a business trip. Before she cold "blow off" prayer; now she prays several times a day. She feels peace within herself knowing she doesn't have to be in control.

The other six in my telephone survey had a time of growth in mind when they experienced prayer with others. One referred to a time when she and her husband began a friendship with a pastor and his wife. She felt drawn to their love of the Lord and the ways they lived out that love. Another commented that her prayer life changed when she got involved in a ladies' Bible prayer group. Now she prays in her own words in a personal relationship with God.

**Prayer Thoughts***: Lord, lead me into growth in my personal prayer. Spare me a crisis. But if it comes, show me the benefit in making me stronger. Show me how I can pray with others.*