

PRAYER

FINDING INTIMACY WITH GOD

LEADER'S RESOURCE GUIDE SESSION 5



LECTIO™

UNVEILING SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

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SESSION 5

CONTEMPLATIO: THE GAZE OF LOVE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Read this overview in advance to familiarize yourself with the session.

We have examined the way in which climbing the ladder of prayer requires us to use the full powers of our minds and hearts to read, reflect, and respond in *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio*. Although God always initiates the encounter of prayer, success in climbing these first three rungs of the ladder is also dependent on the effort we put forth.

The fourth rung of the ladder is entirely different. In *contemplatio* we cease to be the ones acting in prayer and we simply receive the gift of contemplation God offers to us. This encounter with God is very difficult to define or explain. Instead, contemplation is most often described using analogies—tasting, seeing, etc.—showing rather than explaining or defining. One way to describe *contemplatio* is as a gaze of love: we gaze upon Love himself and rest in his loving embrace.

Whether fleeting moments or extended periods of time in the presence of the Beloved, these encounters are to be remembered. God's people remembered their encounters with God in the Torah, and celebrated them in their annual feasts. We do this remembering of special encounters in our temporal life when we celebrate anniversaries and birthdays, when we take pictures of favorite vacations or trips. In our spiritual life we too need to remember our encounters with God, these pearls of great price, so that when trial and dryness arise in our prayer and our life, we can recall God's love and remember Love's presence even in the midst of what appears to be his absence.

Contemplatio is the pinnacle of the ladder of prayer. We begin by seeking the face of God, like Moses on Mount Sinai, and David in Psalm 27:8. After the arduous work of ascent, we rest in the peace of this supernatural encounter with God. The key to *contemplatio* is love—in seeking God's face, we must also seek to love ever more perfectly in order to be prepared to receive and return this gaze of God's perfect love.



CONNECT

*Begin this session by leading the **Opening Prayer** and reading aloud the **Introduction**, both found in the Study Guide.*

*If you have time, review the last session with your group. Can anyone recite the **Memory Verse** (Luke 11:1) without assistance? Otherwise, look it up (page 56) and recite it as a group.*

*Also discuss any highlights or questions the group may have had from the last session's **COMMIT** reflections. Then continue.*

Describe a time when you were completely caught up in gazing at someone you love or something you thought was beautiful. What did you feel in that moment? Is what you felt easy to describe?

Some examples may include seeing your spouse on your wedding day, watching your child sleep, or meeting up with a dear friend after a long absence. Other examples could include being lost in wonder at a beautiful sunrise, a majestic mountain view, or a magnificent work of art. These moments, while they mark our heart and memory in profound ways, are often hard to put into words. Contemplatio is a gaze of love exchanged with God—we can begin to describe this in terms of how we experience a “gaze of love” in human relationships and the natural world.

What is something that you really want but can't work for or achieve on your own? Think of something you can prepare for but have to wait to receive from someone else.

We prepare ourselves to be properly disposed to receive the gift of contemplation, but it is not something we can make happen on our own—it is a gift from God. Some other gifts we can prepare for but not make happen by our own effort might include maintaining good health (to do everything right, but having to wait patiently for healing), having children, waiting for a vocation to be revealed, waiting for a marriage proposal, etc.



Play the video segment, which will last about 28 minutes. The Study Guide provides participants with a brief outline of the topics covered in the video teaching, along with the following discussion questions.



DISCUSS

After the video segment, discuss the following questions. Familiarize yourself with the comments after each question; these are meant to guide you in the conversation.

THE GAZE OF LOVE

1. What was one thing you heard for the first time or that was an “aha” moment for you?

Some new or particularly striking ideas may include the description of contemplation in terms of tasting or seeing, the fact that contemplation is a gift and not something we can achieve if we just try hard enough, Blaise Pascal's description of his encounter with God, etc.

2. What do you think it means to look at God and have him look at you, and for that to be “enough,” as the man in St. John Vianney's parish described?

One possible answer: The idea of looking at God and being looked at by him is an encounter of simply being present—you don't have to say anything or figure anything out; it is just an awareness of God's love for you and your love for God. It is peaceful and restful, not demanding. An analogous experience might be a couple married many years who are happy just being together with no need to speak.

3. Why is it so important to remember our encounters with God, both personally (like Pascal) and communally (like Israel)? How do you do this?

Scripture sets the example for remembering and celebrating our encounters with God. The memory can sustain and encourage us through difficult times. Remembering God's encounters with his people communally (as a Church, as Israel did) builds faith and a sense of community. Some people may use words to remember (like Pascal's note), while others may use art or music to commemorate the encounter. Journaling about our prayer time is a wonderful way to keep an ongoing remembrance of our encounters with God in prayer—both the words and direction we receive in lectio/meditation/oratio, and also any encounters of contemplatio.

Direct participants to this session's Memory Verse in their Study Guides, and read it together. Then lead the Closing Prayer. Encourage participants to do the COMMIT reflections on their own before you meet again as a group.



COMMIT

Following are suggested answers to the questions participants will be asked in their daily COMMIT reflections.



DAY 1 – CONTEMPLATION: THE GAZE AND FRUIT OF LOVE

Participants will explore contemplation as a gaze of love and the fruit of the labor of lectio/mediatio/oratio.

What can you do to increase your love and virtue and make yourself ready for *contemplatio*? Where do you feel your efforts stop and God's gift begins?

Anything we do to deepen our love for God helps prepare us to receive the gift of contemplation. Some specific examples would be to go to Confession, to work to root out sin in our lives, and to love those around us more perfectly. We should especially prepare for contemplation by working diligently and faithfully at prayer through lectio, meditatio, and oratio. There may not be a clearly perceived line between our own efforts and God's gift because prayer is itself a gift that requires our effort in response. God initiates, we work at it, and sometimes we also receive the gift of true contemplation. All of our hard work should serve to remind us that it is God who works first and who works in and through us even in our work.

Spend some time in *lectio divina* today reflecting on God's love and his invitation to "come away" in the passage from Song of Solomon 2:10–13.

Lectio—Carefully read the passage. What do you note?

The bride (my soul) is twice described using the words "my love" and "my fair one." Images of springtime include flowers, blossoms, fragrance, birds, new birth/growth, freshness, fruit, a sense of readiness and anticipation, but also pruning. The call from the Bridegroom (Christ) is to "arise" and "come away."

Meditatio—Reflect on the meaning of what you noted during *lectio*.

This is an invitation to an intimate encounter with the Beloved. The time of sitting and waiting is over, and we are called to "arise" and "come." The signs of spring alert our senses—sight (seeing flowers), smell (smelling the fragrances), and taste (anticipating the figs of the tree and the wine from the vines).

Oratio—Journal your conversation with God.

My Beloved is calling me—will I respond? Will I arise eagerly and go, or will I hesitate? Why do I hesitate? Is it out of fear? Pride? Distrust? Is there pruning needed for a more fruitful harvest in my soul? Do I recognize that everything in the passage (signs of spring, etc.) point me to my Beloved? Do I see these same signs in my day-to-day life? Where? Give God thanks for the many signs of his love.

Contemplatio—Take time to simply rest in God’s presence.



DAY 2 – ADORATION: AN ENCOUNTER OF THE BELOVED

Participants will reflect on how Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament helps us practice and prepare for an experience of contemplation.

When is the last time you went to an adoration chapel? Or stopped by a church to visit our Lord in the tabernacle? What was your experience of prayer during that time?

Some participants may not have much experience at all with Adoration; others might make a regular Holy Hour. Anyone who has experienced Adoration multiple times is likely to have had a wide range of experiences—from initial distraction due to the quiet, to deep, fruitful prayer.

Make time this week to visit our Lord in the tabernacle or adoration chapel, and, as you join the Beloved Disciple close to Christ’s heart, practice the “art of prayer” using the passage from Psalm 24:3–6.

Lectio—Carefully read the passage. What do you note?

Themes include: purity/worthiness—clean hands, pure heart; seeking God’s face, seeking his dwelling ascending, standing, lifting up; and God described as Lord, God of Jacob, and God of [my] salvation.

Meditatio—Reflect on the meaning of what you noted during *lectio*.

Themes of purity and worthiness are contrasted to what is “false” and deceitful...these are two different options/paths, and we must choose one. If we strive to be worthy and “seek” God faithfully, then we will receive blessing, vindication, and “see” God, and not only see but also “stand” in his presence. Who stands in the presence of a king? God is personal, he is Lord, he is Jacob’s God.

Oratio—Journal your conversation with God.

How do I prepare myself for an encounter with God? Do I go into it aware of my sin and my need for forgiveness? How do I approach God with clean hands and a pure heart? Are there false things to which I lift up my soul instead of to God? Is God, “my” God, the God of “my salvation,” lord of my life, my whole life? Can I put my name in the place of Jacob: the God of _____? How much effort do I put into seeking his face? How can I seek him more diligently? How do I feel God drawing me upward, toward himself?

Contemplatio—Take time to simply rest in God’s presence.



DAY 3 – LECTIO: ELIJAH AND THE STILL SMALL VOICE

Participants will reflect on Elijah fleeing from Jezebel and encountering God at Mount Horeb.

LECTIO

What is God's question for Elijah? Look at 1 Kings 19:7–8. Why is this question unexpected?

God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" In verses 7-8 it is the angel of the Lord who speaks of "the journey," so it is God who directed Elijah to Mount Horeb.

How is the voice of God's presence described? What adjectives are used? Look up the definitions for these words.

God's presence is described as a "still small voice."

Still – remaining in place, at rest; free from sound or noise; subdued or low in sound; free from turbulence or commotion; peaceful; tranquil.

Small – of limited size, not big, little; not great in amount, degree, extent, duration, value, etc.

What is the major repetition in this passage? What is framed by the repetition?

God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" Elijah repeats that he has been jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, and faithful to the Lord, while Israel has forsaken God—that he is the only faithful one left, and his life is in danger because of it. God responds with "Go"—first directing Elijah for his encounter on the mountain, and then directing him to his next mission.

This repetition of Elijah's faithfulness and his despair (because he appears to be the only faithful one) frames his encounter with God in the still small voice.

MEDITATIO

Elijah's joy at following God no matter the consequences has been lost, and instead there is despair. How does God put Elijah back on track?

Most of us have probably felt overwhelmed by what God is asking of us at some point, even if we haven't felt specifically that the benefits don't match up to the cost. If we pay attention, God puts the same question to us as he did to Elijah: "What are you doing here?" It's a time for us to step back and reflect on whether our focus is still on God, or on us. Is our faithfulness because of love, personal love of God? God puts Elijah back on track with a personal, profound encounter with himself. When discouragement and despair come, we too need to return to God in a deeper way and meet him in Scripture and spiritual reading as well as in friends or mentors, so that we return to the joy we can only find in God.

Once Elijah recognizes God's presence, what does he do? Why?

When Elijah hears the still small voice and recognizes God's presence, "He wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave." Elijah recognizes the God whom he loves and cannot remain in the cave. In humility he covers his face before the God of heaven, but he "went out"—to be as close as possible to the Lord.

What does it mean that Elijah is “jealous” for the Lord? How do his jealousy and faithfulness open the door to his encounter with God at Mount Horeb? What does the framing of Elijah’s encounter with the repetition noted above teach us?

Elijah recognizes that worship belongs rightfully to God alone, and he wants God to have what is his—he doesn’t want Israel to chase after false idols. Even in the midst of his despair, Elijah is a man who seeks God diligently and loves God faithfully, and this prepares him for the encounter at Horeb. If he did not already love God and desire God, he would not be so quick to recognize God. You have to be listening already to hear the still small voice. The repetition reminds us of this, and also that God sends us out to witness to him—“Go”—but that mission always starts, and re-starts, with our personal encounter with God.



DAY 4 – REMEMBERING THE ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Participants will examine the importance of remembering and celebrating our encounters with God.

What are some ways you remember and celebrate important moments of your life?

Some examples are journaling, pictures, birthday parties, blog posts, anniversary celebrations, etc.

Read Psalm 77. How does calling to mind Israel’s past encounters with God shape the psalmist’s prayer? *The psalmist has an idea of what God should do because he remembers what God has done. His perception is that God has changed—in the past he rescued Israel, but now he seems distant (this is his emotion/perception, not a claim that God does change). But instead of despairing, the psalmist chooses to “call to mind the deeds of the LORD” (v. 11), and so his prayer of sorrow and lament turns to a prayer of praise as he recalls Israel’s encounters with God in the past and is renewed in his trust that Israel will again encounter God in his mighty power.*

Spend some time in *lectio divina* today, joining the psalmist and his exhortation to “remember the works” of the Lord using a passage from Psalm 105:1–6.

Lectio—Carefully read the passage. What do you note?

Psalmist uses strong action verbs in his exhortation—give thanks, call on, make known, sing, sing praises, tell, glory, seek, remember. Notice the object of all these actions—either it is God (i.e., it is the Lord/his name that receives our thanks, calling, singing, glory) or it is his actions (i.e., it is the Lord’s deeds/works/miracles/judgments that are to be told of, made known, or remembered).

Meditatio—Reflect on the meaning of what you noted during *lectio*.

In order to give thanks/make known/sing of God’s deeds, we must first remember them. But remembering should then lead to thanking/praising/singing/glorying in God. Part of remembering is telling others what God has done. All of this leads to seeking God yet again—one encounter leads to another. Identity is in terms of encounter (we are “offspring” of “Abraham his servant” and his “chosen ones”).

Oratio—Journal your conversation with God.

Talk with God about the deeds and works that I remember. To what does my remembering lead? Am I led to praise and give thanks? Am I led to singing and giving glory to my Lord? Am I led closer again to God by remembering previous encounters with him? When I call to mind God’s gaze of love, does it lead me to share his love with others?

Contemplatio—Take time to simply rest in God’s presence.



DAY 5 – TRUTH AND BEAUTY

Participants will reflect on St. Augustine and his mother St. Monica, Ary Scheffer, c. 1846, Louvre Museum, Paris.

(No questions this Commit Day.)