



# PRAYER

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## BIBLE REFLECTIONS

40 READINGS AND REFLECTIONS

## **The Bible Reading Fellowship**

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Edited by  
**ANDREW ROBERTS**



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## About the writers

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## Introduction to Holy Habits

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42-47 (NRSV)

Holy Habits is a way of forming disciples that is emerging anew from an exploration of this precious portion of scripture, Luke's famous portrait of the early church. As such, it is both deeply biblical and an approach that lives when infused with the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit – the same Holy Spirit who brought life, energy and creativity to the first Christian communities.

Holy Habits is based upon a series of ten practices that are shown to be fruitful in the Acts 2 passage: biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, sharing resources, serving, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship, and making more disciples. In this series of material, passages relating to the ten habits are explored one habit at a time, sometimes with reference to other habits. In real life, the habits all get mixed up and





complement each other as part of a holistic way of discipleship. You may want to be alert to such connections.

There are many lists in the Bible, and with biblical lists the first and last items often have particular significance. In this list, it is significant that biblical teaching comes first. All of the habits are to be found throughout scripture, and healthy holy habits will be grounded in regular engagement with biblical teaching. This is a foundational habit.

The last habit is also significant. Commentators have remarked that it is no surprise that ‘day by day the Lord added to their number’ when life was lived in the way Luke describes. Many can be nervous of the word ‘evangelism’. Holy Habits offers a way of being evangelistic that may help to assuage some of those nerves.

Holy Habits is a way of life for followers of Jesus individually and collectively. In Acts 2:42–47, Luke offers clues as to how these practices can be fruitful. Note the devotion he mentions at the beginning and the repeated use of the word ‘all’. Holy Habits is a way of life for all ages (including children), cultures and contexts. The habits are to be lived day by day, in the whole of life, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. And note how Luke attributes the growth that results to the Lord. These are *holy* habits, which flourish when the Lord is at the centre of all.



# Introduction to Prayer

Prayer is a major theme of Luke's gospel and Acts. It is no surprise to see Luke presenting prayer as one of the hallmarks of the first Christian communities. In the immediate aftermath of Pentecost, the focus is on spontaneous, unstructured prayer in either native or unlearned languages (Acts 2:4). The disciples are on fire. The praying is spontaneous, passionate, energetic, noisy and expectant. Sometimes prayer is like that. Such times of prayer are a gift to be treasured. Sometimes, often, usually, it is much more routine. It is a habit to be practised and which takes time to form.

By the time we get to Acts 2:42, Luke slips in the little phrase 'the prayers'. The use of the plural with the definite article implies the use of certain regularly used prayers. The church of Jesus began as a movement within what scholars call Second Temple Judaism, so the shared prayers of the communities described in Acts would have been mainly Jewish prayers with added Christian flavouring. The Lord's Prayer may have been included in the regular prayers.

So, very early on in the Christian tradition, we have spontaneous and set prayers *both* playing a valuable part in living the adventure of discipleship. Similarly, we see both public and private prayer. This is a reminder to us not to be too precious about our preferred ways of praying, as well as an encouragement to try different ways of praying. In this booklet, you will find encouragement to explore different forms and patterns of prayer and to keep going when praying is hard work.

Of all the holy habits, prayer is the one most at risk of becoming dry and difficult. Over the centuries, many of the great saints of the faith have shared honestly about the struggles they have had in prayer. St John of the Cross' poem 'Dark Night of the Soul' explores the struggles we can endure as we seek to grow in spiritual maturity and union with God. In his sermon 'The wilderness



state', John Wesley dealt candidly with the times of dryness we experience along the way of the adventure of discipleship.

Dryness can have many causes. Sometimes, we may just be physically exhausted and need a good rest or change of scene. At other times, our selfishness (sin) may be marring our relationships with God and others and withering our prayer life – in which case, we need to seek forgiveness through confession, contrition and repentance. Dryness can also be the result of tiredness with the way we have been praying – in which case, trying something new and being creative can be really helpful. The strapline of the old Martini commercials can help us, for prayer is a habit to be practised 'anytime, anyplace, anywhere'. And we could add 'with anyone', as, with all the other habits, this is a gift we receive not just for our own blessing but for the blessing of others too. It is both a discipleship and a missional practice and may be just what someone else needs to receive today.



| Lyndall Bywater

## The beautiful art of conversation

Genesis 18:26–28, 32

The Lord said, ‘If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.’ Then Abraham spoke up again: ‘Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?’ ‘If I find forty-five there,’ he said, ‘I will not destroy it’... Then [Abraham] said, ‘May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?’ He answered, ‘For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.’

(NIV)



## Reflection

It's nice to be consulted, isn't it? If you've ever been in a situation where powerful people have made decisions about you without consulting you first, you'll know how belittling that feels; and if you've ever been in a situation where powerful people have asked for your opinion even though they didn't have to, you'll know that being consulted can help to make you feel heard and valued.

Abraham lived in a world where gods did not consult with humans. Most ancient religions believed that, though you could offer a sacrifice and hope for the best, the gods would ultimately please themselves. You certainly couldn't hope to have any say in what they did. In Abraham's time, prayer really was a shot in the dark.

That's what makes this little scene so remarkable. The Lord of all has chosen to discuss his plans with a mere mortal. Much has been written about whether this passage is evidence that God changes his mind when we pray, but that misses the most exciting thing about God and Abraham overlooking Sodom. The beauty of this story is that the conversation happened at all.

If you ever find yourself thinking that everything is already set in stone – that life will happen, and you just have to make the best of it – remember Abraham. God longs to consult with you. He loves to talk with you about the things he is doing in his world. The only question is: are you up for the conversation?

Make a habit of chatting to Jesus. Imagine he's walking beside you throughout the day. Whatever you do, wherever you go, whoever you meet, talk to him about it.



## The right kind of standstill

### Exodus 14:13–16

**M**oses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.’ Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.’ (NIV)



## Reflection

My guide dog is getting old, and though he still loves working, it doesn't come as easily as it used to. This is particularly evident when we're navigating the London Underground system in rush hour. As the commuters tear past us to get to work on time, I have to let him work at his own pace, dawdling along as though we have all the time in the world. It is immensely frustrating, but it is good for my soul because it teaches me something about slowness and stillness.

Impossible situations have much to teach us about prayer. For the Israelites, it was the dilemma of being stuck between an enemy army and the Red Sea. For us, it might be the hopeless feeling of a relationship broken beyond repair, a life-threatening illness or some other problem which seems to have no solution. Whatever brings us to that place, prayer is where we admit that we can't do it anymore and we turn to the one who can.

Moses tells the people to be still. It's interesting advice, given that they were surrounded by danger and their 'fight or flight' responses must have been well and truly activated. Yet it is an act of prayer to stand still in the midst of impossible things. In this non-stop world of ours, we can resist the pressure to go faster, to work harder, to work out our own solutions. Instead, we can slow right down and hand everything over to God. Stillness is our act of trust in the one who can make a way through.

Make a habit of stillness. When you face impossible things today, don't just rush off to find the solution. Choose to stop and pray.



## The one who can

### Exodus 32:11-14

**B**ut Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God. 'Lord,' he said, 'why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever."' Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

(NIV)





## Reflection

Has anyone ever handed you something, a pleading look in their eye, and uttered the words: 'Can you do this for me? You're so much better at it than I am!' Next time it happens, congratulate them, because they've discovered the very heart of prayer.

Here, we find the Israelites in a mess. The elation at being led through the Red Sea has clearly evaporated, and boredom, confusion and frustration have set in. They've rebelled against God and become sick of Moses. And now God is threatening to leave them to find their own way out of trouble. It falls to Moses to go to God on their behalf, in the hopes he can regain his favour.

When we need to talk ourselves out of trouble, we humans usually resort to self-justification. We list all the reasons why we don't deserve to suffer whatever punishment is coming our way. But Moses takes a wholly different tack. Instead of listing his own achievements or those of the people he's in charge of, he lists God's achievements. Instead of making his own case, he proclaims the praises of the one who has got him out of trouble many times before.

The God who loves you infinitely doesn't need you to justify yourself. What he's looking for is your trust. Trust is more interested in who God is than who you are. Trust remembers what God did in the past and believes he will do it again. Trust says, 'Things have gone wrong and I can't put them right, but I choose to hand them over to one who can.'

Make a habit of praise. Stop regularly throughout the day to call to mind all the things you love about God. Your song of praise is a powerful declaration of trust.



## Friendship with God

### Exodus 33:7, 9, 11

**N**ow Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the 'tent of meeting'. Anyone enquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp... As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses... The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young assistant Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent. (NIV)



## Reflection

Real friendship is a mixture of being and doing. You may get on famously with your work colleagues, but completing work tasks together will only get you so far. Friendship only happens when you chat over lunch in the staff room or go out for a drink together after work.

Since Moses had thousands of people in his care, we can assume he and God did a lot of work together – planning strategy, discussing logistics and resolving problems – but what the writer emphasises here is their friendship. In the midst of the work, they talked as friends. And that closeness must have been infectious, since young Joshua stayed behind in the tent to forge his own friendship with God.

It's easy for prayer to become functional. We pray for people; we pray about situations; we ask and we thank, we seek and we labour. All of those are vitally important – but what about relaxing in God's presence and enjoying his company? Our prayer needs to include being as well as doing.

'Being' with God can be tricky, since he tends to be invisible and inaudible. The best way to start is simply to find a place where you feel at ease – a favourite walk or a comfortable chair, perhaps. Then let your mind slow down, your body relax and your soul become aware of his gentle presence keeping you company. Try not to 'do' anything: don't work through any lists or tackle any major issues. Just enjoy his nearness.

Make a habit of stopping to be with God. Choose to clear space for it in your schedule. It will bring prayer to life in a new way.



## An emotional outpouring

### 1 Samuel 1:10–13

**I**n her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, saying, ‘Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.’ As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk. (NIV)



## Reflection

There's something rather refreshing about praying with people who aren't used to praying out loud. I am part of a prayer community where some of our visitors regularly include swear words in their prayers. It can be a little jarring, and we don't necessarily encourage it, but it does challenge me to be more honest and heartfelt when I speak to God.

Hannah's story is one of the Bible's most famous accounts of answered prayer. She eventually gave birth to the prophet Samuel, and the rest, as they say, is biblical history. But at this stage in the story, Hannah is still more familiar with unanswered prayer than answered prayer. She has been asking God to bless her with a child for years. If you've ever prayed that long and that hard for anything, you'll know how easy it is for prayer to become dry and routine. Frustration and disappointment harden our hearts, and we can begin to shut ourselves off from the work of God's Spirit. Perhaps one of the greatest miracles in Hannah's story is not that she was still praying for conception after all those years, but that she was still praying with all her emotions engaged. We don't know if she was swearing, but the way she was pouring out her heart to God was almost as inappropriate, in Eli's opinion.

Is there room for emotion in your praying, or has it become a matter of dry words and familiar routines? Hannah's brand of praying may seem risky; it makes us vulnerable and it opens tender places within us, but only when we pour out our deepest feelings can we truly receive God's comfort.

**HOLYHABITS** is an adventure in Christian discipleship. Inspired by Luke's model of church found in Acts 2:42–47, it identifies ten habits and encourages the development of a way of life formed by them.

These Bible reading notes have been created to help churches and individuals explore the habits through prayerful engagement with the Bible and live them out in whole-life, missional discipleship.



Whole-church resource book and group study material also available

- Provides eight weeks of Bible reading notes excluding weekends
- Takes a biblical and devotional look at each Holy Habit
- Encourages a habit of regular Bible reading

#### Praise for **HOLYHABITS**:

'A great tool that just gets better with use.'

Olive Fleming-Drane and John Drane

BIBLICAL TEACHING  
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**PRAYER**  
 SHARING RESOURCES  
 SERVING  
 EATING TOGETHER  
 GLADNESS AND GENEROSITY  
 WORSHIP  
 MAKING MORE DISCIPLES

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