

PRAYER

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BOLD 1 APPROACH



6 TOPICAL BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES

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matthiasmedia

Bold I Approach

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is a Topical Bible Study?

Topical Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you on a tour through the Bible, looking at material related to the topic (in this case, prayer), helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

These studies are like a tour of a famous city in another sense—they don’t hope to look at everything; just the important things. We can’t cover in detail everything the Bible says on a given topic, but we do aim to finish our tour without having missed any significant landmarks.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of interaction—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the Bible and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- an ‘Implications’ section that helps you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- For small groups, it is very useful if group members can work through the study themselves before the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. If you are a group leader, the material in the appendix 'Tips for group leaders' (at the back of this book) is designed to help you think through how to use these studies in a group setting.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous editions of this Topical Bible Study have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. So with this new edition of *Bold I Approach*, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

» STUDY 1

GOD AND US

MOST PEOPLE ON THE PLANET pray at least sometime in their lives, usually without giving it much thought, or considering it difficult. Children pray, often with disarming simplicity and ease. When difficulty or danger threatens, the immediate response of many is to pray. At one level, it seems to be the most natural and spontaneous thing in the world.

Yet for Christians, prayer can often seem anything like the easiest thing in the world. We know we ought to pray. We feel, almost instinctively, that prayer should be at the centre of our lives. Yet few areas of our Christian walk cause such a sense of failure and guilt. Few things are so agonizingly difficult as consistent prayer. Few things make us *feel* less like a Christian as when we have gone long periods without praying.

Few things too, it must be said, are

the cause of such misunderstanding. While prayer is an almost universal human activity, what is meant by ‘prayer’ is far from universal. Even among Christians, misleading views and practices of prayer are widespread. And because prayer is a problem area for many of us, we are always ready to listen to anyone offering a new perspective, a missing dimension, or a fail-safe technique.

This set of studies will provide no new secret or technique for solving the ‘prayer problem’. There are many such books on the market, their very number indicating that the ‘problem’ remains unsolved, or at least that the techniques do not work.

Instead, we will follow what should always be our first reflex—to turn to God and listen to him, as he speaks to us in the Bible. We will hear what he has to say about himself, and about us, and

about how we can talk to him.

That will be the focus of these studies. We will put our own questions and struggles aside (at least to begin with) to see what God has to say about prayer: what it is, why we should do it, how we should do it, and so on. Having done so, we can come back to our questions and problems, finding perhaps that many of them have been solved by what we have learnt.

The God we pray to

It hardly needs to be said that prayer is an interaction between us and God. It takes place between two parties who have some sort of relationship, and if we

are going to understand the first thing about prayer, we must first discover what this relationship is like. More importantly, we must first discover what God is like.

When the Buddhist spins his prayer wheel or the Hindu sits in mystic silence, both are reflecting the nature of the 'god' to whom they are praying. Prayer takes its shape from the deity to whom we pray. Prayer is only possible if the 'god' is willing to accept our prayers; prayer will only be effective if the 'god' is willing and able to answer our prayers.

What sort of God do you pray to? Let us pause and think further about this.

1. How do you think of God as you pray to him? Do you visualize anything? Do you imagine him listening to you?
2. Can you think of any good reason why God should listen or respond to your prayers?
3. What would prayer be like if God was:
 - a life force or energy?
 - a fierce moral policeman?

Throughout the Scriptures, the Bible writers are quite insistent that the true and living God is very different from the idols and pagan gods of the nations.

What sort of God is he? What is it about him that makes prayer possible? And what sort of prayer will he demand or accept?

4. Read Psalm 104:24–30. What is God's basic relationship to the created world?

5. Skim through the following verses. How far does God's power and control extend in the world? What is he able to do?

- Jeremiah 32:17, 26–27

- Proverbs 21:1

- Matthew 10:29

- Acts 2:22–24

- Romans 8:28–30

6. What characteristics of God suggest that he might be willing to listen to our prayers?

- Mark 1:40-41

- Psalm 145:10-21

7. What characteristics of God suggest that we might have some difficulty approaching him in prayer?

- Leviticus 11:44-45

- Psalm 11:4-7

- Psalm 130:1-3

- 1 John 1:5

- 1 Timothy 6:15-16

How to approach an unapproachable God

FROM WHAT WE HAVE LOOKED AT SO FAR, prayer seems both an exciting possibility and a practical impossibility! God is the all-powerful creator and ruler of the world, who delights to show kindness to all who call upon him. And yet he is the blindingly holy, righteous God, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, and who does not leave the guilty unpunished.

How can sinful and imperfect people like us have any relationship with a God such as this? How can we approach the one who dwells in unapproachable light? And if we cannot approach him with any confidence, how can we hope to speak with him, to make requests and expect him to answer? *How can sinners pray to a holy God?*

The answer to this question is found in the unfolding story of the Bible. It begins with the account of how God created mankind, along with the world and everything in it. It tells of how mankind rebelled against God and was ejected

from his holy presence, and how a powerful angel with a flaming sword was stationed at the entrance to the garden of Eden to make any return impossible.

In many ways, the angel with the flaming sword is a symbol of the problem all mankind faces. The way to God is blocked, and we have no way through. As the story of the Bible unfolds, God himself sets about remedying the situation. He takes the initiative to re-establish a relationship with his rebel creation.

It is very important that we understand how this new relationship with God comes about, what it's like, and where it's heading. If we can grasp these simple but crucial things, we will be well on the way to understanding prayer.

Romans 8 is a great place to start looking at these things; it is an awesome chapter. Sadly, we cannot mine all its riches in this study. For our purposes, let us see what it says about the new relationship God establishes with mankind.

Read Romans 8:1-17.

In this passage, two ways of life are contrasted: what we once were, and what we now are.

8. What were we once captive to?
9. What used to be our attitude to God?

10. What is our new relationship with God like? (See especially vv. 1, 6, 10, 15-16.)

11. What role does Christ have in establishing this new relationship? (See especially vv. 1-3.)

12. Looking mainly at verses 9-16, what role does the Spirit have:

- in making us one with Christ?
- in our relationship with the Father?
- in our daily lives?

Read Romans 8:12-25.

13. What belongs to the Christian now, and what is yet to come?

14. What is the nature of the Christian life now, from these verses?

15. Try to write a brief summary of what it means to be a Christian from all that you have studied in Romans 8.

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WHEN WE LOOK AT GOD—AT HOW high and holy he is, and how low and sinful we are—the possibility of successful prayer seems remote indeed. And yet, because of the saving work of Jesus, we are raised up from our low position and granted free access to God the Father Almighty. As Charles Wesley so beautifully put it:

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living head,
and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne
and claim the crown
through Christ my own.¹

If we can grasp the truth of this, and let it penetrate our minds, then we are already well on the way to understanding prayer. For the new relationship Christians have with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, is the beginning and end of true prayer.

Prayer is not an addendum to the Christian life. It is not in a category of its own. It is at the very heart of who we are as Christians, and how we relate to our heavenly Father.

As we shall see in our next study, what it means to be Christian, and what it means to pray, are very nearly the same thing.

» Implications

- In this study, we have looked at how we can have an intimate relationship with God. What other ways do people suggest we can get close to God or relate to him? What do you think of these?

- Given what we have learnt about God, what would you expect praying to him to be like?

- What does your own prayer life reveal about what you really think of God?

- We have thought about how God's character makes prayer possible. Is there anything about God that *demand*s prayer; that makes it a necessity?

» Give thanks and pray

- It is only because of Jesus that we can have an intimate relationship with our most Holy God. Thank God for sending Jesus to be our mediator.
- Ask God to open your hearts and minds to his word in the coming weeks as you look at what the Bible says about prayer.
- Pray for each other, that as a result of reading God's word you will respond with heartfelt prayer, enjoying the gift of a personal relationship with our creator.

Endnote

1. Charles Wesley, 'And Can it be that I Should Gain?', 1738.