



VIRTUES FOR DISCIPLES

# PRAYER

*Biblical Wisdom for Seeking God*

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of prayer is one of several volumes that explore **Virtues for Disciples**. Each of us is called to be a disciple, a follower of Christ. The life of a disciple is challenging, but it is the most fulfilling way to live. Called by name by the God who created us, we are shaped by the teachings of Christ and continually guided by the Holy Spirit. As we grow more deeply into this identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, we discover the valuable virtues that mark God's people.

# Prologue

At its core, prayer is the act of turning toward God, responding in love to the One who created us. In prayer not only do we call out to God, but God endlessly calls out to us, ever enfolding us in mercy, drawing us close in love.

Why do I pray? You might as well ask me why I breathe. I breathe so I can sing. I breathe to pause. I breathe, awake or asleep, whether I'm aware of it or not. So, too, do I pray. I pray like I breathe, that I might live. Prayer is, as St. John of the Cross said, the “breathing of God in the soul, of the soul in God.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet unlike breathing, prayer is something we must learn and—again and again—choose to do. The Scriptures have much to teach us about prayer. The passages and commentary contained in this small book barely touch the surface. My only hope is that these brief reflections will encourage and support those who seek the face of the Lord and long for him (Ps 42:3), those who wish to breathe in Christ.

Of course, it is not enough to read about prayer. We must practice it. And when we are anxious about prayer, worried whether we are “doing it right,” pastor and spiritual director Daniel Ruff, SJ, has reassuring advice: “The only way to go wrong in prayer is not to do it at all.” All the wisdom of Scripture, saints, and sages can be summed up in a single word of instruction: *pray*.

# *Thirsting for God*

*Begin with a few quiet moments, asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read and pray this excerpt from Psalm 63.*

**Psalm 63:1-9**

**<sup>1</sup>A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.**

**<sup>2</sup>O God, you are my God—**

**it is you I seek!**

**For you my body yearns;**

**for you my soul thirsts,**



In a land parched, lifeless,  
and without water.

<sup>3</sup>I look to you in the sanctuary  
to see your power and glory.

<sup>4</sup>For your love is better than life;  
my lips shall ever praise you!

<sup>5</sup>I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands, calling on your name.

<sup>6</sup>My soul shall be sated as with choice food,  
with joyous lips my mouth shall praise you!

<sup>7</sup>I think of you upon my bed,  
I remember you through the watches of the  
night

<sup>8</sup>You indeed are my savior,  
and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy.

<sup>9</sup>My soul clings fast to you;  
your right hand upholds me.

*Following a brief time of reflection on the psalm, consider the background information provided below in Setting the Scene. The questions in the margins may be used for personal reflection or group discussion.*

### *Setting the Scene*

Our first lessons in prayer often come from listening to our parents or grandparents pray. Long before we understand the words, we sense their rhythm, whether the steady beat of the rosary or the familiar rumble of grace before meals.

The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 prayers, offering us lessons in prayer from those who have gone before us in faith. The psalms are ancient. Some have roots going back thousands of years to the Bronze Age. Indeed, our Jewish sisters and brothers have been singing their praises to God in some of these words since before the time of Miriam and Moses. While their composition is traditionally attributed to King David, the psalms were most likely composed by a number of different poets over the centuries and eventually gathered into a single collection.

In the Jewish tradition, the book of Psalms is titled simply “Praises” (*Tehillim* in Hebrew). These “praises” are both prayer and poetry. At their heart they acknowledge God’s boundless power and glory in a way that bursts with intensity. God’s glory is so immense that we cannot express our praise in words alone and instead are driven to sing! In fact, our English word “psalm” derives from the Greek word for songs that are sung to the music of harps. Collections of psalms are sometimes called “psalters,” from the Greek word for the stringed instruments that might accompany their singing.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls the book of Psalms “a masterwork of prayer” that deserves a permanent place both in the prayer of the church and in our own personal prayer.<sup>1</sup> Of course, like our Jewish brothers and sisters, Christians do pray with the psalms regularly (as Paul exhorted the Ephesians to do; Eph 5:19). We respond to the word of God with a

psalm at Mass (the responsorial psalm). In the *Gloria* and at the preparation of the gifts for the Eucharist, our prayers come from the psalms. The psalms also form the backbone of the Liturgy of the Hours, prayed by religious communities, priests, deacons, and many laity.

The images used by the ancient psalmists are often vivid, stripped of pretense. They are grounded in common everyday experiences, from the sticky slime of snails (58:9) to shattered dishes (31:13). Anyone who has shared a bedroom with a mosquito will grasp the frustration of the psalmist cornered by persistent enemies, whom the psalmist compares to a swarm of bees (118:12). The Cistercian monk Thomas Merton called the psalms “rugged and sober.”<sup>2</sup> These prayers are “rugged” indeed, refusing to shy away from fraught and difficult situations: illness, death, starvation, war, sin, and rebellion. They show us a way to approach our God who is rock and fortress—unassailable, unbreakable. We can say anything to God and still be cherished sons and daughters.

Yet the psalms are not all sober and serious. They can resound with immoderate joy, celebrating births and marriages, banquets and harvests with wild dancing and blasting horns! The psalms are as much a mirror of our resurrections as they are of our agonies.

Psalms 63, an excerpt of which we will examine now, is a psalm of great yearning. With poetry, images, and emotions, the psalmist will help us put words to our own deepest longings.

**What are your earliest recollections of prayer experiences? Who in your life has taught you about prayer or modeled prayer for you?**

*Psalm 63:1-9 will now be explored a few verses at a time to deepen your understanding of the passage. Reflect on the text and questions along the way.*

## *Understanding the Scene Itself*

**<sup>1</sup>A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.**

Many of the psalms are introduced with a superscription—a line of description or instruction. Sometimes the superscription suggests what instruments should accompany the psalm, such as stringed instruments (4:1) or wind instruments (5:1). At other times the superscription links the psalm with a particular person or biblical event, such as King David’s escape from Saul (18:1). Psalm 63 is set in the moment when David has fled to the mountainous region of Judah and is hiding from Saul, in fear of his life (see 1 Sam 23:14-15).

Prayer is often an urgent response to a particular situation in which we find ourselves. We may be in danger or facing temptation, and we ask God to protect and deliver us. Or perhaps we are responding to overwhelming joy as we see a spectacular sunset or hold a newborn child. Yet prayer is more than these spontaneous moments. Prayer is also something we must attend to regularly. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* suggests that making a habit of praying at specific times and in particular places can prepare us to pray at the moments when we are most in need of God.<sup>3</sup>

When have you found yourself in a “wilderness” or trapped by your own circumstances, reaching out for God?



<sup>2</sup>O God, you are my  
God—  
it is you I seek!  
For you my body yearns;  
for you my soul  
thirsts,  
In a land parched, lifeless,  
and without water.

This psalm opens by expressing a need for God that is so immense, so all-encompassing, that it is hard to imagine what could satisfy it. The psalmist isn't expressing a vague preference—say, for coffee rather than tea—but is describing a profound, utterly consuming desire, like that felt by lovers who can't wait for their beloveds to arrive, or by someone in terrible pain who longs for relief. We yearn for God in prayer with a single-minded intensity; nothing else—nothing less—will satisfy us.

But the psalm suggests that this longing is even deeper than we can imagine. It invites us to contemplate a vast countryside spread out before us—dust billowing; dried leaves rustling on the trees; dead, brown grass crunching underfoot; riverbeds bereft of water. It would take unimaginable amounts of water to bring such a landscape to life, more than a million gallons for every acre. In the wilderness where David found himself, it would have taken billions of gallons of water falling from the sky each and every year, soaking into the scorched ground and