

# BECOMING IN PRAYER

## **Reflective Prayer**

*This discussion complements the January 29 sermon on “Reflective Prayer” at Meadowbrook Church and we recommend that sermon as a starting point.*

## **Read Together**

Reflection is the practice of seeing with God what He wants to show us about both Himself and our own selves. When we pause for reflection and self-examination, God can show us how He has been present with us, even in the midst of hard days. Cultivating this kind of sight strengthens our faith and increases our joy. During reflection, God can also expose areas that still need the Spirit’s transforming work to help us become more like Jesus. And while this part may sound hard, it’s essential. If we don’t pause for reflection and open our lives to the Spirit’s work, we will bring the same struggles, false beliefs, wounds, and hurts with us into the next day or the next year. Just changing the date or year is not going to solve everything.

The practice of reflection must include both attention to God’s presence with you and also attention to where you did not walk in the light of His presence. Without the first part, your self-examination will either be dishonest or crushing...either you will see yourself with rose-colored glasses or you will feel crushed by the weight of your sin and failure. Yet, the first part will always lead to the second. We cannot see God without more clearly seeing ourselves. The good news is, attention to God’s presence with us will help us see ourselves as we truly are...both in need of deep transformation and yet deeply loved. We will be fully known and fully seen AND fully accepted. This is what we all long for.

Tim Keller writes of our desire to be both fully known and fully loved: “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.” The practice of reflection is an opportunity for us to remember that we are indeed fully known by God and yet fully loved.

So, to start; what does it look like to reflect on the presence of God with you throughout your day? Psalm 139, a poetic prayer written by King David, is a helpful guide. In verses 1-4, David starts his self-examination acknowledging that God knows him fully. God is “acquainted with all his ways.” And God knows the deepest thoughts of his heart.

David writes:

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me!  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
    you discern my thoughts from afar.  
You search out my path and my lying down  
    and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
    behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.”

Reflection, or self-examination, starts with reflecting on the reality that God was with you all day long, that He sees everything you do, and that He knows all of your thoughts. If we’re honest, this may sound frightening. He knows everything we think?!

Yet, in verses 7-11, David goes on to say:

“Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
    Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
    If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
    and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
    and your right hand shall hold me.  
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
    and the light about me be night,”  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
    the night is bright as the day,  
    for darkness is as light with you.”

Even though God has perfect knowledge of everything we thought and did today, He’s still with us! He hasn’t left us. God is pleased to be with us and as David says, “even there (in the dark places) your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.” So, after reflecting on the reality that God knows everything you did and thought today; the good, bad, and ugly; you can also reflect on the reality that God never left you. He was with you, holding you, all day long!

As we look back on our days through the practice of reflection, we must start by remembering that God was present with us each moment of the day. He was present when we cursed our co-worker in our mind (or out loud!), when we were impatient with our son, or when we escaped into the fleeting comfort of an addiction. He was with us, holding us, when we felt afraid, alone, anxious, or sad. And He was with us in the moments of joy and gratitude. He was with us when our hearts felt in tune with Him and when He was the

furthest one from our minds. Through it all, He was with us. There was nowhere we could go to escape His presence! He never left us, even when our hearts were far from Him.

This kind of reflection, knowing that God loves us and was with us, frees us, then, to be truly honest and examine our days without fear that God will leave us or forsake us.

In Psalm 139, King David goes on to invite God to help him see his life more clearly:  
Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting! (vs. 23-24)

Because we trust God's love for us, we can invite God to look at our days with us, search our hearts and reveal what David calls "any grievous way" in us. As God graciously reveals our sin and the areas of our lives that need changed, He invites us to confess our sin, be forgiven, and experience the transformation that comes through genuine repentance. And when we experience God's forgiveness, we also get to experience true joy.

As we search our hearts and days "with God", the Spirit may reveal our sin and ways we did not walk in God's presence and graciously invite us to confession. And when we confess our sins to God, "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) He does not begrudgingly forgive us. Richard Foster says it well: "Remember the heart of the Father; He is like a shepherd who will risk anything to find that one lost sheep. We do not have to make God willing to forgive. In fact, it is God who is working to make us willing to seek His forgiveness." (Foster, Celebration of Discipline, pg. 153)

## Community Discussion Questions

1. Self-awareness and self-examination are very popular in our culture, and rightly so. What are some of the similarities and differences between the common cultural version of self-examination and the Biblical version presented in this guide?
2. Why do you think it's important to start times of reflection focused on God and His presence? What's the danger in starting with yourself?
3. On a typical night before you go to sleep, what is the state of your heart and mind? How do you normally process the events of the day, good and bad, and anticipate what's coming tomorrow? How does this affect how you do, or don't, sleep that night?
4. What beliefs or assumptions sometimes keep us from honest self-examination and reflection? How do we sometimes avoid honest reflection?
5. If God already knows us fully, including our sinful thoughts, and still hasn't left us, why do we even need to confess our sin and ask for forgiveness?

Close your time highlighting the at-home individual practice and encourage everyone to try this at home this week. This is probably the most important part of the growth process. Just "learning" about prayer won't produce change in us...we have to practice reflective prayer as a way of attaching ourselves to Jesus.

## At-Home Individual Practice

One night, before bed, **set aside 10 minutes to pray through the \*Prayer of Examen.** (This can also be done in the morning as you reflect on the previous day.)

\*One note on the Prayer of Examen. Although God's people have been engaging in reflection from the beginning, this prayer tool was first developed for the church by Ignatius of Loyola, a sixteenth century priest and theologian. This has been modified and adapted for our use today.

The steps below will guide you through this time of reflection, but this doesn't have to be a linear, rigid process. Don't worry so much about following the directions and instead use these steps as prompts to help you begin seeing your day with God. Be patient with yourself if you experience distraction or can't remember what you even did today.

### Preparation

Spend a few moments in silence and quiet your heart. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. It's okay if you're coming into this time with your mind racing about the day or what you need to do tomorrow. Remember a key Scripture or prayer God has brought to mind to help you settle into resting in God's presence with you. If you don't have one in mind, rest in the Father's words, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." (Jeremiah 31:3)

### Invitation

Invite God to help you as you reflect on your past day. Ask for His help to show you how He was present with you throughout the day.

### Review Your Day

Identify the major events of your day, including spiritual practices, meals, meetings, time with others, conversations, work events, etc. Reflect on these, noticing where God was present with you. When did He provide for you? Comfort you? Convict you? Speak to you? Reveal something to you? Protect you?

### Give Thanks

Thank God for each part of your day and for being present with you in the ways you just noticed. If there are unresolved issues or questions from your day that you still don't know what to do with, share these with God and thank Him for being with you even in the tension or darkness.

### Search with God

Explore your day again with God and invite God to show you where you did not walk in His presence. Pray Psalm 139:23-24:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting!

**Confess**

As God brings moments to mind when you did not walk in His presence, confess these to Him. Explore with God what was happening in your heart. What fears or anxieties surfaced? What need or longing did you have that you sought to fulfill apart from God? What lies did you believe? Confession should be specific and not vague.

**Ask Forgiveness**

Ask for God to forgive you and be assured that He will, based solely on the work of Jesus Christ (see 1 John 1:9). Rest in the work of Jesus for you, knowing that you are forgiven and loved by God.

Afterward, God may lead you to *also* confess your sin to others; especially those who you may have sinned against. Be attentive to where the Spirit may be leading you. The Spirit may also lead you to share what God is showing you with brothers or sisters who know you well and can walk with you.