

Persistence

Opening

Hymn “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 752)

Text

READ LUKE 18:1–8: The Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge

Prayer

Merciful God, we thank you for this summer season, for times of rest and renewal, fellowship and fun. Guide us as we study your Word that we might follow the examples of your faithful servants and learn to persevere in prayer. We ask this in the strong name of our Savior and Friend, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Overview of the Sessions

Jesus expects his disciples to pray. Whether first-century or 21st century followers, we pray so we might connect with God through speaking and especially through listening. Theologian M. Shawn Copeland said it well in *Practicing our Faith* when she wrote, “Prayer requires our attentiveness, our readiness, our active and watchful waiting to hear, to receive, to cooperate in what God imparts to us. For our conversations with God are never one-sided” (p. 68).

In this Bible study, we will explore three aspects of prayer. We will learn some about what Jesus and the early evangelists thought and taught about the importance of being persistent in prayer. We will look at passages in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) that exhort us to “wait upon

the Lord” and we will explore the relationship between prayer and waiting. And, we will seek to understand the power of prayer to change us and perhaps our circumstances too.

The goal of this study is to deepen our relationships with God, ourselves and one another by attending to the word and will of God for our lives and our world.

As we bring our authentic selves to these studies—our hopes and dreams, our fears and failures, our histories and cultural heritages, may we be reminded that each of our lives is indeed a prayer, as Jesus lives and serves through us.

We Need to Pray

Many of us grew up learning to pray. We remember being children seated at the kitchen table with hands folded learning the familiar table grace: “God is great, God is good and we thank God for our food...” Or maybe your memories lead you back to bedtime, kneeling on the floor or lying snuggled under the blankets as your mom or dad taught you the evening prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep...” (See “Shaped by Song and Prayer,” p. 6.)

When we were little we were taught to pray because we needed God’s protection or to express our gratitude to the One who gave us food, family, and friends. But do we still hold to these notions today? How many of us say grace at mealtime anymore or seek God’s protection as we close our eyes in slumber? Is it busyness that has distanced us from those faith practices of yesteryear or don’t we believe we need to pray in these ways anymore?

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Do these questions ring true for you or is your prayer practice different than described? Take a few minutes and talk together about how you pray now.

Context before Text

So often when we read the Bible, we rightly ask, what is this text saying to me? While this is a very important question, we Lutheran Christians also want to know about the context in which a particular text comes to us. What was happening in the world when the passage was written? And are there any other scriptural references that may pertain to these verses? What was the writer trying to tell us about God? Answering questions such as these often helps make our Bible study richer and helps to deepen our understanding.

On Judges and Widows

The parable that Jesus tells in Luke 18 has two unnamed characters whose roles were quite familiar within Judaism: judges and widows. Like the image of God as shepherd that sets the stage for our Christian understanding of Jesus as the Good Shepherd or for pastors as “shepherds,” words like “judge” and “widow” evoked certain common understandings.

In ancient Israel the duty of judges was to maintain harmonious relations and to decide legal matters between Israelites. Establishing *shalom* among God’s people or peaceful and right relations was the ultimate goal. Widows were often deprived of their husbands’ support and could not inherit their estates, which passed on the deceased man’s sons or brothers. So disputes involving widows were fairly common. It was the responsibility of judges to hear complaints fairly and impartially; a role that was especially important because there was no such thing as “jury duty” in ancient Israel.

Care of widows was an important expectation within the covenant community. There are many biblical passages that speak of God’s expectation of mercy in the treatment of widows, orphans, and foreigners.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Take a few minutes and look at some of the passages below to get a fuller grasp on how judges were expected to treat widows in the Old Testament: Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:16–17; 2 Chronicles 19:6–7; Psalms 7:11; Psalms 68:5; Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:17–18; Zechariah 7:9–10.

Luke on Prayer

More than any of the other Gospels, Luke has a greater emphasis on prayer. Most biblical scholars consider Luke to be the “Gospel of prayer.” Indeed, in several different stories in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Luke makes observations about Jesus praying that is not found in the other gospels. These include the stories of Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21); his choosing of the Twelve (Luke 6:12–16); and in Luke 11:1, Jesus even prays before the disciples ask him to teach them to pray! Keeping the Old Testament context in mind and Luke’s emphasis on prayer, let’s turn now to our chosen passage.

The Testy Text

The parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18 is unique to Luke’s Gospel. Most of us have had someone in our lives who kept on badgering us until they “got on our last nerve.” Perhaps it was a child who repeatedly asked you for a toy until she finally wore you down. Maybe it was a congregational member who wanted you to serve on a committee and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Regardless, most of us have known what it’s like to have someone bother us endlessly until they get what

they want. And that's precisely the image that Jesus uses to describe how he expects us to pray in Luke 18.

This parable appears to be a response to questions regarding when God's judgment will come and God's faithful be vindicated. For the Early Church, the delay of Christ's second coming was not just a chronological problem, it was a life problem. The concern was not solely that Christians were dying under various persecutions, but they were dying with no end in sight, even while the wicked seemed to prosper. "How long, O Lord?" was probably not an uncommon question.

It's a very human tendency for us to ask questions about when circumstances are going to change, especially during times of trial or persecution, whether individually or in community.

What do we do while we're waiting for things to change—particularly when suffering doesn't lighten or injustice seems so rampant? (See "The Gift of Waiting," p. 12.) Jesus' response is that we pray—always! We pray night and day, expecting that God will grant justice to us just like an unjust judge will grant what the widow is asking for just to get her off his back.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Can you think of a time in your life when you wondered how long you were going to be in a trying situation? Maybe a relationship was unstable or a loved one was diagnosed with a terminal illness. How did you respond to the ongoing crisis? Was constant prayer among your reactions?

Digging Deeper

The parable is introduced by a single sentence: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." We know from the previous chapter, that Jesus is still speaking with his disciples and encouraging them to constancy and perseverance in prayer. There is no geographical specificity in this passage either. We are told only that in a "certain" city there is a judge "who neither feared God nor respected

people." Given the kind of behavior expected of judges (as noted earlier) the parable makes it very clear that this judge can hardly be trusted to implement justice or have the slightest bit of compassion for the widow.

The widow is introduced next, but again we know nothing about her except that she is in need of justice. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." While we don't know the nature of her complaint, it is likely that she is asking the judge to make a third party give her what is owed to her, probably money or property or both. The judge is her only hope of getting a just settlement. Thus, persistence is not optional, but mandatory!

While the unjust judge may be callous, he is not stupid. He can tell from the widow's behavior that she will not stop bothering him until she gets what she wants. So the judge does the right thing, even if for the wrong reasons and the widow gets what she needs.

Persistence Pays Off

Remember how the parable started: Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. In effect, he was telling his disciples, that prayer for them should be as constant as their breathing. They were to pray always and not to get discouraged, even when it seemed like the wrongdoers were winning. (See "The Power of Persistence," p. 22)

What a powerful message this can be for us today. With unemployment on the rise, wars raging around the world, people losing their homes, and sickness abounding, how can we attend to Jesus' message of persistent prayer? How can we model ourselves on this widow who through her tenacity and endurance finally got what she needed? Indeed, won't God give God's children what we need when we come before the throne of grace with our pushy and unrelenting prayers?

Not long ago the beloved wife of a dear colleague died of pancreatic cancer. Throughout her illness she

was daily lifted up in prayer by thousands of people around the country. The day she was to begin her chemotherapy, her spouse, a Lutheran pastor, began to receive calls from people, some of whom he knew and some whom he did not know.

Each caller said something like this: “I’m a friend of Pastor Johnny and I’m calling to pledge 5,000 prayer warriors. We will daily be in prayer for you, your wife, and your family.” While the numbers of pledged prayer warriors varied from caller to caller, the commitment to daily and persistent prayer was solid. One of the last callers even shared the content of his congregation’s prayers: “Lord,” we said, “Hold her or heal her and you know what our preference is.”

What a powerful witness to the persistence of prayer. Throughout their ordeal, my friends felt carried and upheld in prayer—by their families, their congregation, and by prayer warriors from near and far. And while the outcome was the ultimate healing that comes through death for believers, the “hold her” part of the warriors’ prayers were as real as if our God were embracing them in the flesh. Jesus is calling each of us to pray always and not to lose heart. Let’s continue our practice today! (See “Prayer: Everywhere, Every way!” p. 18.)

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Have there been times in your prayer life when you have been like the persistent widow? What enables you to remain “pushy” in your prayers? What keeps you from being constant? How can your women’s group or congregation help?

Closing

One of the most beloved hymns in the Christian church was written more than 150 years ago by a man who knew tragedy and loss as well as the enduring comfort of persistent prayer.

Joseph Scriven was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1819, and came from a prosperous family. He graduated from Trinity College, Dublin. When he was 25 he decided to leave Ireland and immigrated to Canada. His departure seemed to be influenced by his religious beliefs as well as by a personal tragedy: the accidental drowning of his fiancée the night before their scheduled wedding. Later when he was settled in Canada, Scriven fell in love again but tragedy came the second time when his fiancée contracted tuberculosis and died.

Originally a poem, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” was never intended for publication. But when he learned of his mother’s serious illness and couldn’t visit her in faraway Dublin, Scriven wrote her a letter of comfort and enclosed the words of his poem which he called, “Pray without Ceasing.”

To close this session, sing, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (*ELW* 742) and as you do, pray in your hearts for those who have or are experiencing tragedy or loss in their lives, for those who need the persistence of a prayer warrior, and for yourselves that you may be like the widow in our text and be constant before God’s presence in prayer.

Coming next session

In addition to being persistent in our prayer life we also need to be patient, to wait upon God, who as St. Paul assures us in Philippians 2:13, “Is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” God desires that which is in our best interest, even if it’s not what we ask for.

The old joke about patience says, “Lord, give me patience and I need it right now!” For some of us, that’s what our prayer life is like. We pray and expect God to answer in our time, not God’s time. For our next session we will look at what Scripture has to say about waiting upon God who hears and answers prayer, but in God’s own time. Stay tuned.

Persistence

“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel...” (EPHESIANS 6:18–19)

Thank you for agreeing to be a leader for this Bible study series on prayer.

As you prepare to lead others in these Bible study sessions, remember that you don't have to be an expert on prayer or the best intercessor in your congregation, circle, or group. You need only open your heart to God's will for those who attend, read the materials carefully, and be ready to experience the gifts God has in store for all who participate, including you!

Overall Structure

While these studies may be used individually, they are designed primarily for small groups. Before each session, take time to read the various biblical texts assigned in the session. You don't have to know each Bible passage by heart, but a minimal awareness will be useful as your group discusses the questions in the “What About You?” parts.

Since each session begins and ends with a devotion and closing, it will also be important to either familiarize yourself with the suggested hymns or

to try and have a musician or song-leader present to assist. Be sure to have copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* on hand. Should your congregation not be using *ELW*, check other hymnals like *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* or *With One Voice (WOV)* for the suggested hymns. And if all else fails, feel free to change the selected hymn to suit the needs of your group. Flexibility in leadership is vital.

Creating a safe and relaxing space is important as you think about these studies too. Always keep your audience or participants in mind. Who will be coming—older women, college-aged students, mothers of young children, widows? Knowing who your participants are may help you think about room requirements. Some like to sit on sofas in lounge areas; others may prefer to be seated around tables with Bibles a plenty at hand. Still others may prefer to bring their own Bibles to the study. Mainly it's important to think ahead about those whom you will be leading so you can adequately prepare for their presence.

Helpful Homework

In the first session it will be helpful to take some time to do simple introductions after the devotions. Some may be attending Bible study for the first time or may not be acquainted with others in the group. The “What About You?” sections will certainly help the participants get to know one another better and develop a sense of group cohesiveness, but be sure that everyone feels welcome in the beginning.

It’s also important to encourage as broad a level of participation as possible. It may be difficult to know in this first gathering, but you’ll soon discover those who like to share and those who tend to be a bit shy. As the studies progress, do your best to ensure that everyone who wants to participate gets to do so. You might even suggest that those who tend to speak a lot “step back” to enable others to get into the discussion and that those who are more reserved “step up” and take a risk.

As you read the study together, explore the questions. Additional questions might emerge; feel free to pursue where the group is leading and don’t feel bound to cover every aspect of each study from start to finish. It’s important to remember as well that just as you don’t have to be an expert on prayer, you also don’t have to have all the answers to questions that may come up. It’s fine to say, “I don’t know” or “I’ll have to ask the pastor.” Sometimes it helps to simply sit in silence and let others respond if they feel so moved.

What Did We Learn?

After most programs or activities I try to include some sort of evaluation. Feedback is useful because it helps us understand what worked—and what didn’t—as we prepare to lead another session. Before you close with devotions, you might consider including a short feedback opportunity. Make it simple and fun. For instance,

you could have a small stuffed animal or ball on hand and toss it to someone inviting them to share something they liked or learned from the day’s session. After sharing they toss it to another person, until all have had an opportunity to contribute.

If you enjoy sharing leadership responsibilities, you may want to invite another participant to lead devotions for the next session. If so, be sure to extend the invitation to your group before you leave.

Finally, remember that God has something to say to each of us in and through Scripture. The United Church of Christ has a slogan that says, “God is still speaking!” Indeed, God is still speaking, and will do so through those gathered for these studies as well as through the biblical passages. Trust that God is present and do your best enjoy the experience of leading others into a deeper relationship with God, themselves and others. 🌸

The Rev. Gladys G. Moore (below) is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. For some 22 years she served as an urban pastor in Jersey City and Newark, N.J., and for 16 of those years she was also an assistant to the bishop of the New Jersey Synod. Pastor Moore now serves as Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass.



Waiting with Patience and Hope

Opening

Hymn “O Master, Let Me Walk with You”
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 818)

Text

READ ISAIAH 40:28–31

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Prayer

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 76)

Who Wants to Wait?

In our first session we explored the importance of being persistent in prayer and were encouraged to model our prayer lives on the wonderful widow who wouldn't wince when confronting the wicked (judge, that is). In this session we look at waiting from a biblical perspective and try to discern the relationship between waiting and prayer.

I don't know about you, but waiting is not one of my strong suits. Patience is not a fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22) that has ripened yet in my faith journey. In fact, one of the reasons I enjoy Advent as much as I do is so I can practice that which does not come naturally to me—namely, waiting!

Seriously, I don't like waiting. And it's pretty hard to avoid doing so in this increasingly busy and over-crowded world. I get into the “express” line at the grocery store and wait. Fast food is not only unhealthy, but it's often served slowly. With a confirmed appointment, I wait at the doctor's office. Last summer I actually waited for more than an hour in line to view the body of a deceased co-worker and extend my condolences to her family.

I'm pretty sure you know what I'm talking about. We wait at the mechanic's, at the concert, and even in the communion line at church. Is it any wonder that when we pray we want our prayers answered in a hurry, or at least in our desired time-frame and not necessarily God's?

While waiting may be difficult for some of us, Scripture encourages waiting as one of the most important spiritual practices. Time and time again, we are urged to wait upon God.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Read these passages from the Psalms and see what they have to say about waiting: Psalm 27:14; Psalm 33:20–22; Psalm 37:5–7; Psalm 38:15–16; Psalm 40:1–3; Psalm 62:1–2; Psalm 130.

Some of these psalms indicate that while we are waiting God is working. What are some of the

things God is doing while we wait? These psalms also suggest a connection between waiting, trusting, and hope. How do you understand these connections?

Waiting and Weight Loss

This subhead may have fooled you into thinking that by participating in this Bible study you might get thin. Sadly, I have no magic formula for shedding pounds. However, I do think there is a correlation between our ability to wait upon the Lord and the emotional or spiritual “weight” that we carry. One of our needs in waiting on the Lord is the need to cast our weighty burdens on God. It’s like the hymn-writer said, “We should never be discouraged, take it to the Lord in prayer.”

Someone once said, “If you pray, why worry? And if you worry, why pray?” As simple as this adage sounds, it’s much harder to practice than it is to preach. Some of us carry so many burdens around that waiting on God in prayer seems like just one more thing to add to our “to do” list. We take our burdens to the Lord—and instead of leaving them with God, we take them right back again at the end of our conversation. (Read “Changed by Prayer,” p. 26.)

But if we were to truly take our weighty matters to God and then wait for God to deal with them—to help us forgive the sibling who hurt us deeply; to open up doors to a new job; to find the right continuing-care facility in which to place our beloved and aging parents—if we could earnestly turn these burdens over to God and wait for God’s response, we would indeed feel lighter, both emotionally and spiritually.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What does it mean then to wait upon our God? Think of a time when you “cast your burden upon the Lord” as it says in Psalm 55:22. How did you feel when you “let go and let God”?

Waiting Takes Time

When the psalmist wrote in Psalm 130: “I wait for you, O LORD, my soul waits; in your word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who keep watch for the morning, more than those who keep watch for the morning,” (*ELW* Psalm 130:5–6) he was comparing waiting expectantly on the Lord to the guards who kept watch over the city at night.

The hours often seem to pass so slowly in the evening. Even though the same 60 seconds per minute are ticking by as in the daylight, somehow when the sun sets the time appears to lengthen. One thinks of nurses who work the late shift watching over their patients while the rest of the world sleeps, or of police officers who protect the city streets under the cover of darkness while the TV entertains us.

For the psalmist, waiting for God was a more intense experience than what the night guards went through as they watched the clock in anticipation of the dawn and their release from duty. Daybreak was certain, but not without the passage of time. When we wait for the morning, like the guards of the city, we are waiting for more than simply the passing of time. We are waiting for the sun to rise and day to break, for the light to replace the darkness, for the evening chill to be replaced by the warmth of the sun.

Waiting involves an expectation of something special. Waiting means anticipation, expectation, and confident hope that something will indeed take place. Ultimately, waiting on the Lord is like waiting on the sun to rise—waiting expectantly for the Lord’s answers to human needs, just as the sun brings the warmth of the day.

I once heard the Rev. Dr. James Forbes preach an amazing sermon on Hannah, mother of Samuel. Hannah waited a very long time to conceive Samuel and was regularly ridiculed for being childless by her

rival wife, Peninnah. Nevertheless, Hannah prayed and waited, waited and prayed.

Although her story is brief, it is powerful. And the text in 1 Samuel 1:20 says that in “due time” that is, in God’s time, Hannah did become pregnant and give birth to Samuel. Forbes used Hannah’s name as an acrostic and proclaimed, that when “Human Agendas and Needs meet the Needs and Agendas of Heaven, (HANNAH) there’s going to be a bright star rising.” Hannah prayed and waited expectantly upon God and God granted her the gift of that bright and shining star among prophets, Samuel.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

For what have you waited and how? Share a time when you prayed fervently for something and waited for God to answer. Did you receive an answer to your prayer? Was the answer what you were expecting or something different? What was the waiting time like for you?

For Whom are We Waiting?

When I was a little girl, I used to play a trust game with my father. Dad would tell me to climb up two or three stairs and wait until he’d tell me to jump as he stood ready to catch me. Each time I did this I’d laugh with delight as Daddy said, “Jump.” I would dutifully obey and land safely within his strong, loving arms. With each successive jump my father would challenge me to go higher and higher until finally I was at the top of the landing, 12 to 13 steps above where Dad was at the base of the staircase.

After practicing this maneuver three or four times, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that my father would catch me. Still, the height was a bit scary for a little kid. But when Dad said, “Jump,” I would jump, flying through the air down the staircase. And Dad never once dropped me; he never let me fall. Without knowing my dad and trusting him completely, I never would have had the courage to take those won-

derful leaps of faith and go flying into his arms. Our life of waiting on God in prayer is similar. When we wait on God, we are waiting for the One who knows and loves us to act for us. Our ability to wait on the Lord stems from being confident and focused on who God is and what God is doing. It’s based on trusting God’s promises, purposes, and power as revealed to us in Scripture as well as through our own individual stories of God acting in our lives and world.

God Never Grows Weary

This is what Isaiah knew when he wrote those wonderful and poetic words that were in our reading earlier. The ancient Israelites believed that God had forsaken them because of their rebelliousness. They had been driven out of their homes when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem back in 587 B.C. (Ancient Babylon is near where modern-day Iraq is.)

Now, some 40 years later, they are exiles in a foreign land, strangers and outsiders at best. And they are never allowed to forget, not even for one moment, that where they are is not their home. They are constantly reminded of the tragic truth that they are a subdued people, a conquered nation.

But these conquered people are also a covenant people. They’ve heard stories about Yahweh, about the God of their ancestors. They’ve heard about the God who took their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt and led them into the Promised Land. They’ve heard plenty about the God of Abraham and Sarah and how they wished that Yahweh would come again to rescue them and take them home!

Many of us can appreciate the sense of despair and disappointment that these exiles were feeling. Perhaps our communal situation is not as grim, but individually or as a family we may not have escaped hard times. The message in Isaiah chapters 44 to 55 is addressed specifically to people who are experiencing or have endured trying circumstances. And the thrust of the

proclamation is clear: God is coming to comfort you, wait upon the Lord!

Indeed, if God, the Creator and Preserver of all things—who never wearies of caring for God’s creatures and creation—is in control, then our chief response ought to be that of trust. We trust in God’s unfathomable love and compassion towards God’s children and wait.

Listen to how the good news unfolds beginning with the powerful preposition “but.” Even youth and young people who seem to have boundless energy get tired and fall exhausted, says the writer. ‘But’ hold on, there’s good news coming; ‘but’ wait just a little longer, something’s about to happen—‘but’ are you ready for the Lord to act? “But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

First, there is a general promise, “. . . those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.” As we wait for God we are promised new strength to do whatever is needed. This includes emotional, moral, and spiritual strength—and undoubtedly physical strength too, since our bodies are often affected by our spiritual condition.

And the evangelist’s promise gets even more specific than just the renewal of our strength. We are promised that we will “mount up on wings like eagles,” that even in the midst of difficulty we will be able to rise above our problems and wait on God’s solutions. Thus, we become part of the solution by allowing God to keep our anxiety in check.

In addition to soaring like eagles though, we are assured that we will run and not get weary and walk and not faint. No matter how long the course, we can stay on it because God is with us. No matter how long the journey, we keep on keeping on because God goes with us.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Have you or someone you know ever experienced the truth of Isaiah 40:29 and felt God’s power when you were exhausted or God’s strength when you felt powerless? Think about the questions in Isaiah 40:28, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” How will people know about God unless we share our stories?

Prayer as Patient Waiting

From the psalmists to the prophets to our Savior, Jesus himself, the posture of prayerful waiting upon God comes with deep and abiding benefits. Whether our form of prayer is quiet devotion and Scripture reading, walking along the beach or through the woods, or gathering together with others in meditation and song, it is important that we learn to wait upon God. (Read “Speaking with God: Conversation Tools,” p. 12.) For God empowers us to face everything we need to be and do with renewed emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual strength when we lean into God’s presence through waiting. May it be so with you.

Closing

Many of our most beloved hymns and songs are taken from passages in Scripture. As a closing, read responsively Psalm 91 and sing together the popular hymn “On Eagle’s’ Wings” by Father Michael Joncas whose hymn is an adaptation of this psalm (*ELW* 787). Pray for those who wait: for the birth of children or the peaceful death of loved ones; for family members to return from war or for new-found meaning to life. And remember to pray for yourself with patience and hope.

Coming Next Session

Next session we will learn some about the power of prayer to change us and our circumstances, perhaps in surprising ways. 🌿

Waiting with Patience and Hope

Welcome to our second Bible study session in which we will re-discover for some and learn anew for the others, the importance of waiting with patience and hope as we pray continuously. How did the first session go? As you prepare for this session, take some time in prayer and reflection to think about what happened during your first gathering. What did you learn about the women who attended? Are there any seasoned prayer warriors among you? If so, how might you enlist their aid as you learn about praying with patience and hope?

What did you discover during the brief feedback session? Taking notes during this time will be useful as you seek to make this Bible study opportunity as rich and relevant to this particular group as possible.

Be prepared as well to welcome any newcomers who might join your group for this session and think about ways to include them.

Praying the Psalms for a Week

The Psalm verses chosen for this session speak wonderfully about waiting on God. As you await God's wisdom to be revealed for you and your group, daily pray one of the following verses: Psalm 27:14; Psalm 33:20–22; Psalm 37:5–7; Psalm 38:15–16; Psalm 40:1–3; Psalm 62:1–2; Psalm 130. Read the passage aloud, focus on any special phrases or images that come to you, and then offer the group and its needs to God in prayer.

It Works If You Work It

When the first session was drawing to a close we suggested that you do a short evaluation of your

time together. Before you do the closing devotion of this session, it would be good to gather some feedback too.

Ask one or two of the following questions to get the ball rolling: What, if anything, in the session surprised you? Disturbed you? Challenged you? How might your prayer life change as a result of this session? What would be helpful for you as we conclude the Bible study next session?

Closing

The closing hymn “On Eagles’ Wings” is a sacred song composed by Father Michael Joncas, a Roman Catholic priest. It was written in 1979 after Vatican Council II when the Catholic Church began using vernacular hymns at Mass. Its words are based on both Psalm 91 and Isaiah 40:31.

“On Eagle’s Wings” is a very popular hymn throughout the Christian church and was used at many of the funerals of those who died in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

As you prepare to end this session (even if you’re not leading the closing yourself) you might share this history of the song and invite participants to reflect on what they were doing 40 years ago when this song was written and how much the world has changed in these four decades. How does God continue to raise us up today? 🌸

The Rev. Gladys G. Moore is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. For some 22 years she served as an urban pastor in Jersey City and Newark, N.J., and for 16 of those years she was also an assistant to the bishop of the New Jersey Synod. Pastor Moore now serves as Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass.

Power

Opening

Hymn “O Praise the Gracious Power” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 651) or “Take My Life, That I May Be” (*ELW* 685)

Text

READ EPHESIANS 3:14–21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, but always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 86)

The Power of Prayer

In our first two sessions we learned about the importance of persisting and patiently waiting for God in prayer. In this final session we will seek to discover the power that is available to us as believers through the practice of prayer.

When I think of the word *power*, the first thing that often comes to mind is electricity, that invisible flow of energy or power which makes our lives easier. Even as you are reading this, you might be sitting near a fan or in an air-conditioned room, reading by a lamp, sipping a cup of tea whose water was heated on an electric stove.

My point is that electricity, while so necessary to our lives, is something we rarely think about until we do not have it. Like air and water, we tend to take electricity for granted. But we use electricity to do many jobs for us every day—from lighting, heating, and cooling our homes to powering our televisions, computers, washing machines, and countless other appliances and conveniences.

Of course, it is living within our North American context that makes it possible for us to have round-the-clock electrical service. In many rural, war-torn, and developing places and countries throughout the two-thirds world, electricity is either unavailable, or if it is available, may be so only sporadically at best.

Now imagine what life would be like if we couldn't plug in to a power source? Our sense of connection to others and the world would be severely limited and we might very well feel isolated and alone. Our ability to navigate through life is to a great extent dependent on our connect-

ability, our ability to stay continuously connected to our energy or power source so we can do what we need and want to do in life.

For Christians, prayer is one of our chief sources of power that enables us to connect to God. While worship is the main font from which God's baptismal grace and power flow to and through us, many of us only attend worship on Sundays, leaving six other days in which we need to connect to God through our Great High Priest, Jesus. Prayer is a way in which we make that connection or tap into God's power in Christ.

Both the context and the content of our prayers can be as varied as we are as individuals. The primary point is that we make the connection. It doesn't matter whether we're kneeling, standing, or driving; alone or in a group; praying spontaneously or through the *Lectio Divina*, a traditional way of praying meditatively with the Bible so that the Word of God can reach into our hearts and minds. The main issue is that we make the connection. (Read "Speaking with God: Conversation Tools," p. 12 and "Praying in Song," p. 22.)

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Do you have a favorite way of praying that you use more than others? Look at one of the settings of the liturgy in an *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or *Lutheran Book of Worship*. How often are the words *pray* and *prayer* used within our liturgy? How would you describe the relationship between our liturgy and prayer?

Does "Plugging In" Make a Difference?

So often we wonder if our prayers are really heard and answered; we ponder whether our prayers truly work. When we ask these very human questions we are basically wondering about prayer's power or efficacy. Do my prayers make a difference at all—to God, to and for the one being prayed for, to and for me?

Yet the power of prayer is not dependent on the person praying; rather, it resides in the One who is being addressed in prayer. Time and time again, Scripture tells us that God hears and answers prayer. In Matthew 7:7–11, Jesus assures us that our prayers will be answered. He says,

"Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

Even with Jesus' assurance that God does answer our prayers we wonder if we can we trust Jesus' promise. For sometimes we pray and do not get the answers we had hoped for. A marriage is strained and we pray for reconciliation only to have our sacred union end in divorce. We ask God to keep our son or daughter safe as they go off to war and instead they come home as amputees. How can we be confident that God is listening, especially when God's response to our prayers is not always what we expect?

The power of our prayers is not dependent on the person praying, the passion behind the prayer, or even the purpose of the prayer, for God answers prayers that are in accord with God's will. Sometimes God's answers are hard to discover and even harder for us to accept. But if we listen carefully, we will eventually discern what God is saying to us.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he taught them what we have come to know as "The Lord's Prayer." The third petition of the Lord's Prayer says, "Your will be done, on earth as in heaven." In his Small

Catechism, Martin Luther asks, “What does it mean when we pray that God’s will be done?” And his explanation is as potent now as it was when the catechism was first written. “In fact God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us.”

A colleague of mine Pastor Barbara Berry-Bailey said it a different way. She wrote: “We want what we want, not what God wants for us. We pray ‘your will be done.’ We really mean: ‘Your will be done, my way.’ Although our prayer is answered, it doesn’t look exactly like what we had in mind.” God’s answers may not always be what we want to hear, but we can be confident that they will always be in our best interest.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Re-read Matthew 7:7–11. While Jesus says, “Ask and it will be given,” the reality is that God’s answers to our prayers may take several forms: “Yes. No. Wait.” Or “This is even better!” Share a time when God answered your prayers. How did you know your prayer was answered?

For What Should We Pray and When?

If we believe that God hears and answers our prayers, even if in God’s own time and way, then what should we pray for and how often should we pray? Jesus taught us the importance of daily prayer. When he taught his disciples to pray, he told them to ask God for their daily needs.

Jesus also set an example of daily prayer by praying himself during all kinds of circumstances. He prayed at his baptism (Luke 3:21). He often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16; Matthew 14:23). And of course, Jesus prayed as he faced his impending death. (Matthew 26:36–45, Luke 22:39–46; 23:34, 46). (Read “Between the Daily and the Divine,” p. 6.)

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What is your prayer life like? Do you pray daily or multiple

times throughout the day? Do you have a favorite place to pray? Are there times you are more prone to pray than others? What are they?

Some people think that we should only take our most serious requests to God and leave the little things to our own devices. Others ponder the virtue of asking for such things as parking spaces or lottery winnings, questioning whether these requests are in accord with God’s will. But prayer is not magic. God is not some Santa Claus in the sky ready and willing to give us everything we write on our heavenly wish lists.

Some contemporary spiritual leaders would have us believe that prayer is as simple as attracting what we want through the positive energy we put out into the universe. The power of positive thinking is indeed biblical. St. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” But I repeat, prayer is not magic; it is mystery.

While we do not know exactly *how* prayer works, we do know *that* it works. When we faithfully come into the presence of the living God through prayer, it changes things. In our conversations with God, which comprise both speaking to God as well as listening to what God has to say to us, we often gain insight, clarity, peace, and hope. (Read “Changed by Prayer,” p. 26.)

Reinhold Neibuhr’s “Serenity Prayer,” with which many of us are familiar, captures this sentiment well:

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your

will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.”

God does indeed want us to earnestly come to God with our needs and hearts’ desires. And God’s help through the power of prayer is available for all kinds of requests and issues. Right before the verse in Philippians quoted earlier, St. Paul writes about prayer. He says in 4:6–7, “Do not worry about anything, but in *everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Not only does God give us peace, but God’s power working through us and available to us in prayer, enables us to do far more than all we might ask or imagine. The question is: Do we trust it?

Ten years ago, I was eager to support the ministries of those who were living with and dying from HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as in the United States. I had met Bishop Ambrose Moyo of Zimbabwe and asked what he might do if he received some money to support HIV/AIDS work in his country. His response was immediate. He would help AIDS orphans.

Although I wasn’t a cyclist at the time, I had dear friends who were involved with the Boston-New York AIDS Ride the previous year and had raised a few thousand dollars to support those living with HIV/AIDS in these two large U.S. cities. I wondered what would happen if I were to do the ride myself and ask folks to give two gifts: one to support those in the United States and a second-mile gift to care for those living in Zimbabwe.

The response I received was overwhelming! The New Jersey Synod of the ELCA became fully supportive of the idea, encouraging congregations and individuals to support the ride. Sunday school

children and congregations of those living in poverty got involved, sharing their limited resources for the sake of those who had even less. By the time the ride occurred, we had raised more than \$16,000; \$5,000 of which went to AIDS centers in Boston and New York City and the remaining \$11,000 was transmitted to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) for AIDS ministries.

In 1999, \$11,000 U.S. dollars was the equivalent of almost half a million dollars in Zimbabwe currency. And this all came about because of a simple conversation and a trust in God’s power to accomplish abundantly far more than all I could ask or imagine. The initiative was communal from start to finish. And God was glorified through the compassionate care of both the dying and the living.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

How have you seen God’s power at work through the prayers you have offered? Where have you experienced God’s activity in healing, guiding or changing life’s circumstances? How has that power been evident in your life?

Closing

Prayer is such a powerful force that we will never be able to fully plumb its depth and breadth in our lives of faith. My prayer is that throughout these sessions you have gained a deeper appreciation for the importance of persisting in your prayer life, of being patient, and for your growing confidence that prayer does change things.

Let’s close these studies by singing a wonderful prayer by John L. Bell (*ELW* 814) “Take, Oh, Take Me As I Am.” As you sing this prayer, ask God to use all that you have learned during these sessions to help you be and become what God would have you be—a beloved, gifted child of God and disciple of our Savior Jesus Christ. 🌿

Power

Nelson Mandela was released from prison on February 2, 1990, after 27 years at Robben Island near Cape Town, South Africa. When the iconic freedom fighter came to the United States and visited New York City in June of that same year, 50,000 people gathered in Yankee Stadium to greet him. As he arrived, they repeatedly and enthusiastically shouted the very word he himself spoke when he stepped outside the prison gates: “Amandla!”

Some people had difficulty pronouncing the Zulu word for *power*. People yelled “A-Mandela” or “Awanda.” Some even called out “Amanda!” which prompted a confused police officer to ask a fellow officer, “Who is this Amanda, anyway?” For some, understanding the power of prayer can seem as confusing as trying to pronounce the Zulu word for power, *amandla*. Our task in this final Bible study session on prayer, however, is not so much to understand the power of prayer than it is to recognize and trust it.

Further Preparation

If you have a copy of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, re-read the section on the Lord’s Prayer. You can find it on page 1160 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer petition-by-petition is both a wonderful teaching tool and a good devotional practice as you get ready for this session. One of the things that makes it so helpful is the down-to-earth way in which he reflects on this ancient prayer that Jesus taught us.

Praying When We Feel Powerless

One of the issues that may arise as you lead this session is the inevitable question of what happens when we pray and God’s answer is delayed or perhaps even “No.” It’s important to remember that you don’t have to be the fix-it person. Rather try to understand yourself as one who facilitates the individual’s or group’s ability to listen to their own voices. Should such questions arise, count on the group’s wisdom too. It’s amazing sometimes how the well-timed words of a fellow believer can calm our fears and settle our hearts even when we still don’t have solutions to our problems.

Feedback and Closing

Since this is the last session in this series, rather than doing a question form of evaluation, use the time to pray about ways in which the group has been challenged or has grown through these studies. Give thanks for the growth and the challenges and for one another. And be sure to offer your thanks for the privilege of leading the group. 🌿

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Has your group used this study for a one-day retreat? Let us know how it went. Email a brief description of your retreat (with photos, if possible) to lwt@elca.org.