

Practical input

Practical pointers and ideas for seeking God

The following practical input resource is based on a handout we produced for an evening we were asked to help lead at a local church on 'Going deeper with God' and experiencing his presence more intentionally and frequently. It is designed to help people seek more of God in their daily lives and to provide some specific starting point ideas to try new things. We hope you find it helpful.

Section 1 – Practical pointers for building a lifestyle of seeking

1.1 Removing limitations and growing expectancy (Ephesians 6:18; Luke 11:1-11)

Sometimes it's helpful to spend some time thinking and praying about whether you have placed any limitations on where, when and how you might be able to pray, worship or meet with God.

When... Is meeting with God something that you only expect to happen at particular times – are you perhaps only being open to pray and listen during church services, dedicated quiet times etc?

Where... Church services are a brilliant place to hear from the Word, experience God's presence, and have fellowship with other Christians, but God has so much more for us throughout the week. There are opportunities to learn about him, walk with him, and meet him in many new contexts and ways. But are we actively seeking him in these places?

How... Sometimes we can become accustomed to a narrow range of options being the acceptable ways to "worship", and even reach a point where we are wary of giving ourselves or others permission to explore something different. As an example, most churches today spend the bulk of their worship in auditory activity – we listen to a sermon and some scripture, we sing hymns and songs, and we speak liturgy. All these things are good, but given that most of us aren't primarily auditory processors, what about other more visual or active ways of sensing, learning and exploring?

Is this really for me? We can even be tempted to doubt that we are the right kind of person to meet with God, deciding that knowing him deeply is for other people who are more "spiritual" or only for those of a different personality type... but the truth is that God desires to have an ever-deepening and unique relationship with us all.

If you identify any areas where you have set these kind of limitations – whether consciously or unconsciously... ask for God's forgiveness and help with removing this obstacle. Ask him to reveal to you the truth of his desire to meet with you as a unique individual. And ask for his help to become expectant about encountering him throughout each day in different ways. Remember, we're all taking this journey step-by-step – it's going to take our whole lives...

1.2 Consciously coming to God (Psalm 46:10)

Sometimes we rush into a time of prayerful seeking without taking the time to stop and consciously come to God. His presence is with us all the time, but sometimes it takes us a bit of time to catch up with that and become aware of him – to open the eyes of our hearts to him. And sometimes, when we don't prepare – especially if our heads and hearts are full of to do lists, anxiety or distractions – it can be very difficult to focus on God.

It can be helpful to consciously prepare as we enter a time of prayer, worship or Bible study by working through a step-by-step process... there are a number of different ways that different people use to do this, but you might find one or more of the following helpful:

- *Stop*: consciously think about ceasing what you're doing or thinking. *Drop*: mentally put down all the things you're thinking about for a moment (you could even write that down if that helps you). *Relax*: Take a

moment to meditate on an aspect of God's character and praise him for it. *Be still and know*: Thank God for who he is and enjoy focusing on him without an agenda before you start doing anything.

- *Kneel*: as an act of drawing aside, acknowledging you are coming before God. *Open your hands*: as a symbol of offering up everything to him. *Sit or stand with your hands still open*: thank God for being with you.
- *Visualise*: going on a physical journey round a room where you "write" down your "baggage" and leave it in an open suitcase at the foot of the cross; take off your shoes and consciously stand on "holy ground"; wash your hands and ask to receive Christ's forgiveness; enter into his living room)
- *Simply breathe*: In and out; in and out – becoming conscious of your breathing and everything slowing down. Now begin to consciously meditate on an aspect of God's character as you breathe in; and to consciously let go of something you are holding on to as you breathe out.

1.3 Finding your first prayer "language" (Psalm 139)

As mentioned in section 1.1, sometimes we place limitations on how we can pray, worship, or hear from God, imagining that have to do it in certain ways, in the same way as others, or just how it's done in church. This can sometimes mean that we don't give ourselves permission to explore meeting God in other ways.

All of us are individuals with different learning styles, passions, experiences, and gifts – and we all have our own preferred methods of communicating. So depending on these, as well as whether you're primarily a visual, kinaesthetic or auditory processor, you're likely to find some ways of meeting with God feel more natural to you than others.

Think about times you have felt God speak you in the past, and things that have helped grow your faith or spoken to you at a deep spiritual level – it might even be helpful to note them down. You'll probably have a range of different types of things but it's likely that patterns will emerge, with particular "methods" happening more often than others. For example... perhaps you are often struck by scripture; or witness new revelation when outside in God's creation; or feel closest to God when singing or listening to worship music, or when you're doing art, or when hearing a sermon or podcast; or perhaps it's when you're out running or in the gym...

When you find something that seems a primary or significant way in which you meet with God – cultivate that "language" by spending more time seeking God through it.

If you don't feel you have ever had times of God speaking to you on a deep level, don't worry about this. Prayerfully begin to explore lots of different "languages" and analyse what you learn and experience as you do.

1.4 Exploring other prayer "languages" (Psalm 119)

Many people reach the stage of finding a way that consistently helps them meet with God and build their relationship with him on that – but then stop there. This is missing out. It's great to explore lots of different ways of seeking God as he will show you different things through different types of prayer and worship. The more open you are to practising his presence, and making more opportunities to meet with him (and listen to him for the people around you too), the more you will discover the great richness of his character.

In addition, spiritual life is often characterised by seasons... and this affects how we meet with God too. Something that has worked well for years might suddenly not produce the same effect. Perhaps it's time to try something new?

1.5 Making space (Psalm 84)

Sometimes it can be helpful, just as with prayer "languages" to identify particular places – or even to create one – to go to for more prolonged times of prayer and worship. This might be somewhere outside, at the gym, in a church building or somewhere at home... perhaps chosen because it's quiet, comfortable, noisy, or has less distractions.

Some people also find it helpful to create a designated space which deliberately and visually helps them focus – e.g. by sticking up photos that inspire, significant scriptures, or artwork depicting something about God's character.

Such places are not in themselves special, but if they can help you deepen your relationship with God, use them. It's also good, as with prayer "languages", to be prepared to leave your space sometimes and try somewhere new.

1.6 Exploring disciplines, rhythm and freedom (Ephesians 2:8-10)

As individuals and churches we often tend to favour *either* freedom *or* structure, and sometimes are guilty of chasing our favourite one at the expense, or even exclusion, of the other.

Most of us will find it helpful to build in some rhythm and discipline to seeking more of God, and will find that without conscious and deliberate decision-making and activity, our best intentions can easily fall by the wayside. So structure is good!

Building in a set time, or times, during the day and/or week/month – in which you worship and pray, read your Bible, wait on God, and meet with other Christians – will help you not only remember to do these things, but also to grow as a disciple.

Wherever possible, these set times need to fit in well with your usual routine to be sustainable. Why not see if you can also give God some of your "peak attention/productivity" slots too? And don't forget that you might find that you can double up on certain activities – perhaps starting to consciously pray while cooking or doing the washing up?

However, whether in reference to your set times or the activities you undertake within them, be open to balancing discipline with freedom, rest and grace! Try to avoid limiting yourself to only seeking God at these points, and try to bring variety into the things you do with him. Sometimes when you feel reluctant it's important to press in, but at other times it's good to rest and remember that it's all about grace and relationship rather than methods and ritual.

Try too to build an expectation of spontaneous times of seeking God at other times, either through short "arrow" prayers during the day as you approach particular situations or people... or in a more prolonged way outside of your usual routine.

1.7 Cultivating a lifestyle of seeking God (Hebrews 12:1-3)

We've kept coming back to the same point... if you want to grow in this area, you need to cultivate it – through prayer and action. That happens in two ways – by heart change as the Holy Spirit works in you to transform you; and by conscious change as you modify what you do to make more room for his work in your life. The two together are a virtuous circle which feed back into each other in an ever-deepening way.

Our individual relationships with God are exactly that – relationships. We can't force or manipulate God into meeting with us – but the fact is we don't need to. He is a God who longs to meet with us; who is seeking for us; and who promises to be found when we seek. So if we seek from the heart – in prayer and action – he will be found.

Section 2 – Some specific creative ideas to explore

This is by no means an exhaustive list of ideas, and you will probably have more... You might also like to try regularly starting your prayer and worship by asking God to bring to mind anything specific for you to do during that time.

2.1 Meditating on the Word

Scripture is God's word to us – so God is always speaking to us because his word is right there on the page. As well as spending time reading and reflecting on scripture, perhaps aided by one of the many great daily reading notes and devotional studies, it's also helpful to explore new ways of engaging with the Bible. For example, you might find it helpful to use some Ignatian ideas for exploring scripture (as well as for prayer and meditation generally) as these can really bring it to life in a new way. You can find out more about these here:

<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/>

Similarly, using the Psalms as the basis for your prayers and then using different pronouns to pray sections directly to God, or to declare them out loud over situations and people can be helpful... as can using them to help frame your prayers for yourself or others by changing the descriptions etc. Interpretations such as the NCV or The Message can help with this too.

2.2 Visual reminders and meditations

More than two thirds of us process the world visually and yet often our homes and workspaces (and sometimes even our churches) lack much visual life in respect to our faith. Why not find some art which really speaks to you about God, his character and/or his creation to put up? Then every time you look at it, you will be encouraged to lift your focus to him.

Writing out scriptures, song words, or anything else that has struck you and displaying these by your computer, the kettle, or other key places you will see them throughout the day can also really help break down any false divides between the sacred and secular aspects of your life.

Whether you're an artist or not, why not spend some time creating pictures, collages, or anything you'd like (using templates and tracing is fine!) to visualise key scriptures. These take time to create which means you really absorb the truth you are creating – plus at the end, you have something available as a permanent visual reminder.

2.3 Writing and other forms of creativity

As well as art, it's good to explore other forms of creating things which depict or personally paraphrase truth to help you absorb it more fully – both while creating it, and later when you look back at it. This might be songs, poetry, stories, craft... or simply thinking around the ideas brought out of a passage of scripture and writing these down in notes, lists or spider diagrams.

2.4 Journaling

Write down in a specific place the things that have particularly struck you or that you've found really helpful. Looking back regularly on how God has spoken, and what you've learnt about him, will help build your faith and encourage you to discover more.

Remembering and meditating on God's faithfulness to you in the past can also be a gateway of praise into experiencing something new in the present, especially if you're struggling to focus or feel distant.

2.5 CDs, playlists, podcasts and Audio Bibles

Every day, we're all bombarded with so much noise, media messaging, advertising and information. So if we're looking to increase our focus on God's truth in the midst of this, we need to increase the proportion of truth "inputted" into our minds each day.

As well as sermon podcasts, audio bibles and daily devotionals (many are free), there's a huge variety of Christian music available too – whether specifically worship music or more just informed by a faith-filled perspective. You might find it helpful to invest in some CDs or tracks to form playlists to play during specific times of prayer and worship and/or to have on in the background when you're working, driving, cooking or at the gym.

2.6 Other ways of incorporating prayer into existing tasks

Many people find they really meet with God when they are running, out walking, or doing the washing up, and so choose to cultivate these times by incorporating listening to worship music or podcasts, or praying out loud while they are doing these tasks. But you can also consciously create opportunities to focus on God by associating particular routine tasks – such as boiling the kettle – with a chance to meditate on a scripture, or sing a short song of praise. Or if you're doing acts of service for people (e.g. baking a cake) why not spend this time also praying for them and asking God whether there's anything he wants to bring to mind for you to encourage them with?

2.7 Being still or being active

Many people find stillness and quiet helpful in prayer. But often, we then rush to fill the silence with our praise and petitions. Give time to just be still and know God is God, listening out for anything he would bring to mind or sight.

Equally it can be hard to keep attention in an extended time of prayer or worship if you are just sat still. You might find it helpful to vary your posture when you're praying – or perhaps to tie in your posture with what you're doing, e.g. to kneel when you're interceding, stand when you're praising and declaring, and sit with your hands open when you're wanting to hear or receive...

2.8 Expanding your view of God

Many of us run out of words or energy in our prayers because our vocabulary is limited. So why not spend some time consciously widening your understanding of God and his character? One particularly helpful exercise for expanding our view of God, and the facets we can approach any situation with, is to write the alphabet out on a piece of paper, and then next to each letter list as many attributes, names or characteristics of God as we can think of. More details on this are available here: <http://www.thesanctuarycentre.org/resources/creative-prayer-ideas-names-and-attributes-of-God-to-use-in-prayer.pdf>

Sometimes our prayers can also be restricted because we've not made enough time to take in new truths, or have forgotten to make a note of new testimonies and answered prayers. Develop your relationship with God by studying more about him in his Word, and in teachings, and through consciously recording what you're learning about, and experiencing of, him on a day to day basis.

It's also good to read, hear and ask about others' testimonies, and about significant moves of God in the church, past and present, as fuel for our prayers and inspiration for our faith.

2.9 Going beyond words

Don't worry if you sometimes run out of words to express what you want to say to God – whether in praise or as you bring people and situations before him. In any relationship there are times of simply being together, of companionable silence, and even of deep emotion where nothing is said. Romans 8 tells us that the Spirit of God intercedes through us with groans too deep for words. Sometimes you might experience a burden to pray for something, or a sense of emotion that feels like experiencing how God might feel. Don't worry if you don't have all the answers as to why you're feeling this way – just keep giving it to God.

If you have received the gift of tongues, this can be a wonderful blessing to use it in your prayer and worship times. When you are lost for words, or you feel like you are coming to the end of ideas of what to pray for, but want to keep praying, allow the Spirit to give you these new words.

2.10 Allowing others in

The focus of this handout, has been on personal growth and discipleship but we want to stress the importance of remembering that while we are called to intimacy, we are not called to insularity, individualism or permanent retreat.

The church is a body and a family, and Christ longs for it to grow together and reach out together to those who are still on the outside of it. So alongside asking for heart-change, and consciously changing our behaviour to seek more of God, we mustn't forget to also ask God to guide us all in developing and deepening how we reach out to others. Here are three prompts to help you think about this:

1. Could you be more intentional about talking to, and learning from, other Christians about how they meet with God? And through this, help to build a culture where we are all expecting to continually find more of God, and encourage one another in this?

2. Could you spend some time considering how you could share things you discover with others, either by doing some of the activities together, or by passing on encouraging scriptures or things you have created?
3. Could you ask God to help reveal to you how to balance seeking to know more of him personally with growing a heart for others? And to give you an understanding of how he is calling you to pray for, and reach out to, those in need and/or currently outside of this life-giving relationship you have found?

Some ideas of how you can incorporate outward focused prayer and worship into your personal times of seeking God are available here - <http://www.thesanctuarycentre.org/resources/creative-prayer-ideas-bringing-outward-focus-to-personal-devotions.docx.pdf>