

Session 2: God will offer us guidance in answer to our personal prayer

I. Opening Prayer (5 min.)

The passages that will be prayerfully read as part of the opening prayer are the Scriptural foundation for this teaching.

Allow participants to quiet themselves before reading from Scripture:

- “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:24)
- “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7)

II. The TEACHING for Session 2: God will offer us guidance in answer to our personal prayer (30 min.)

Read aloud the following teaching or have the participants read the teaching silently.

It is only through prayer that we develop a deep friendship with God. Prayer is a beautiful experience. St. Teresa of Avila said, “Prayer, in my opinion, is nothing more than a sharing between two friends.” We tend to think it is complicated or make it complicated whereas God keeps things real and simple – in the best sense of what that word means. It is through basic personal communication in prayer that we are able to receive God’s guidance and recognize His will for our lives. It is quite amazing that the God of the Universe desires that we speak with Him and that He will respond to our prayer, providing us with the guidance that we need. When we want to know God’s will and receive His guidance, the best way is to simply “ask.”

In seeking God’s guidance, we want to carry on a two-way conversation with Jesus Christ – God Himself. To receive an answer from Our Lord, it is necessary to practice silence. We must quiet down interiorly in order to be able to listen and “hear” God’s response. In prayer we also need to be attentive and patient. It is important to remember that the guidance we receive from God is not always what we had in mind, nor will it always come in the way that we expected. As He told us through the prophet Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways.” (55:8)

Taking time each day for prayer is essential for developing a habit of praying for God’s guidance. It is a win-win situation for us as our capacity to hear and recognize the Lord’s response intensifies with practice. Additionally, we deepen our very personal friendship with Jesus through a faithful commitment to daily prayer.

One thing we can be sure of is that God always answers every prayer. The answer might be “yes”, the answer could be “no”, or the answer could be “not yet” because God knows there is a “right timing” involved and that timing has not yet come. Sometimes the answer is “yes” because God knows that what we are praying for is for our good. Sometimes, the answer to

our prayer might be “no” because sometimes we pray for something that we think will be the best thing for us, while indeed, we are wrong. Thank goodness the answer from God is sometimes ‘no,’ if what we are asking for is not good for us. And sometimes the answer to our prayer is “not yet” as we may not be able to identify or know the answer immediately. When we seemingly don’t receive an answer because of God’s perfect timing, we need to remember the importance of patience.

The answer to prayer may also come in the form of silence, which is also guidance for us from the Lord. A lesson to learn from this situation – feeling like God is not responding over a long period of time – is to grow in our trust of Jesus; that He always wants what is best for us. God is always good even when the circumstances around us are seemingly difficult. The “Good News” is that “God shapes all things together for good for those who love Him.” (Romans 8:28) It is the very nature of who He is. Nothing in the world can change that.

The answer to our prayer will rarely come to us in “audible words.” However, sometimes we will ‘hear’ the voice of God in our thoughts. As well, as we grow in our relationship with God, He teaches us to recognize His inner promptings in our hearts. Our part is to PAY ATTENTION!

One of the wonderful benefits of quiet prayer is that God brings us to a place of peace. And in that peace and stillness, we become more able to ‘hear’ clearly God’s guidance. This is the reason that a daily time of prayer, including some quiet listening, is an absolute essential for seeking God’s guidance.

We need to ask God for His guidance and then listen and “watch” for His response. When we do notice an answer to prayer, no matter how small or insignificant or incredibly large and important, let us be amazed and thankful that God knows and cares for each one of us personally. Let us deepen our love for the Persons of our Heavenly Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit by the way that we live our lives as committed disciples.

It is useful to discuss some specific helps on how we can go about asking for God’s guidance. There is no right or wrong way as our personal conversations with God are as unique as our personalities, our situations in life and our requests. Here are some simple guidelines for seeking God’s guidance on a daily basis.

Set aside time for prayer each morning to seek God’s direction:

- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to focus on God (Jesus or our Heavenly Father) and thank Him for three things in your life.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to relinquish your difficulties, distractions, desires over to Him.
- As you are given the grace to quiet down inside, ask God if there is anything He wants to tell you and/or if there is anything you can do for Him today.
- Listen and make note.

- It is important to note that God will give us guidance one step at a time. He usually does not reveal the whole picture as it could easily overwhelm us. The important point is that we follow in obedience. Then He will reveal the next step. In prayer, you might say, “Lord, what is the next one step that you want me to take.”

Discussion questions for small groups

Question 1. From this section on “God will offer us guidance in answer to our prayer” respond to the following questions. Underline in the teaching: What touched you most deeply? or What stood out for you? or What resonated most with your personal situation currently? Why?

Question 2. Why is taking time each day to pray so important? Why is taking time to quiet down and listen in prayer necessary?

Question 3. Summarize in one or two sentences: What is your takeaway from this teaching on how God guides us in answer to personal prayer?

Question 4. If you were going to relate something from “God will offer us guidance in answer to our prayer” to your family tonight at the dinner table, what would you tell them? Would you

- 1) share the story with them or
- 2) mention something that was helpful to you from the teaching or
- 3) bring up something that especially resonated with you in connection with your own life experience?

III. An example from Scripture: God gave His guidance in answer to the prayer of Saul and Ananias (Acts 9: 1-20) (25 min.)

Participants are to look up Acts 9:1-20 in their Bible, which is provided below. In verses 6, 11-12, Saul received guidance from God while He was praying that a man named Ananias would come and lay his hands on him so that he would recover his sight. In verses 11-12 and 15-16, Ananias receives guidance to go to the house of Judas on the street called Straight to lay his hands on Saul so that he might regain his sight.

¹ “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁶ “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Discussion Questions

From this teaching on “God will offer us guidance through personal prayer, allow the participants to answer the following questions silently and then discuss:

Question 1. Summarize in 4-5 sentences what is happening in this Scripture passage.

Question 2. When did Saul receive guidance from God? When did Ananias receive guidance from God?

Question 3. What stood out for you? Why?

Question 4. Does this remind you of something or someone in your life?

Question 5. What word or phrase from this passage “leapt off the page” or had special meaning for you?

Another outstanding story from Scripture that is well worth reading is Joseph in the Old Testament. This incredible story relates how God offers His guidance to Joseph through being sold into slavery, interpreting dreams, raised to power, etc. in Genesis chapters 37, 39, 40 – 48.

A brief summary of the entire story of Joseph can be found, written at an adult level, in the Modern Catholic Picture Bible by Fr. Lawrence Lovasick.

The following summary describes briefly of how God guided Joseph:

All of Joseph's guidance came as a result of his faithfulness to his personal relationship with God. Growing up, Joseph interiorized what he had been taught about God's ways and lived faithfully according to what he should and should not do so as not to offend God. God was able to raise Joseph from the pit of slavery and his time in prison to the position of Prime Minister of Egypt. God turned all that was meant for evil into salvation for the human race at that time through the provision of food. God's guidance of Joseph took place over a long period of time, as Joseph remained in obedience to God to the best of his ability to the extent that he understood. Joseph also walked faithfully – obediently following God's law to the extent that he understood it.

Through his daily personal relationship with the Lord, God was able, through Joseph, to use what was meant for evil and use it for good; to save all the people of the world, including the Chosen People.

IV. True, modern-day stories that relate how God offers us guidance in answer to personal prayers (25 min.)

Two modern-day stories have been provided. It is suggested that the participants read one story; the men read the story by John Gleason and the women read the story by M.L. Carney. These stories reveal how the Holy Spirit still gives guidance in answer to personal prayer. If time permits it would be beneficial if the group could read both stories.

Story 1

'A Hatful of Miracles' by John Gleason

I had just graduated from Northwestern University and wanted to see something of the world before settling into a career. With some money saved from a summer job, I was heading for Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, places that seemed romantic to me. It was October.

In New York I boarded a rusty old coal-burning freighter. At first there seemed to be just three passengers besides myself: a bright young civil engineer from Michigan; a worried-looking old man in a white linen suit; and a stately, charming woman who turned out to be Mrs. Charles Colmore, wife of the Episcopal bishop of Puerto Rico, who was returning there after a visit to relatives in the United States.

We made friends quickly, the way you do on a sea voyage. Then, two days out of New York, a young woman with dull blond hair appeared on deck for the first time. She was in her early twenties, much too thin. She looked so pale and wan that we instantly pitied her. She seemed a bit wary of the male passengers, but she accepted Mrs. Colmore's invitation for tea in her cabin.

"It's a strange story," the bishop's wife told us later. "She comes from a little town in Pennsylvania and she's on her way to the West Indies to look for her husband. He evidently left home several months ago after a violent quarrel with her mother over his drinking and his inability to find a job and support his wife properly. She finally heard a rumor that her husband had gone to the West Indies. She still loves him, so she left her 'old dragon' of a mother, and now she's on her way to find Billy – that's her husband's name: Billy Simpson."

"You mean," I said incredulously, "she's going to leave the ship when we get to San Juan and start looking? Why, that's crazy! There are hundreds of islands in the Caribbean."

"I told her that," the bishop's wife said, "but it didn't seem to make any impression. She just says she'll find him. How, I don't know. But she seems absolutely sure of it."

"It would take a miracle," the old man said, thin and intense in his white tropic suit and brown wool cap.

"It would take a whole hatful of miracles," I muttered.

"Does she have any friends where she's going?" asked the young engineer. "Does she have any money?"

"No friends," said the bishop's wife. "And almost no money. Not enough to get her back to New York."

When we heard this, the rest of us dug into our pockets and raised some money to give to this strange waif of a woman.

"This will help you find a place to stay when we get to San Juan," the bishop's wife said when she presented the money in front of all of us. "And I'm sure our church there will help you find enough for your return passage home."

The woman murmured her thanks. Then she said, "But I'm not going home. I'm going to find my husband."

"Where? How?" asked the old man. He had been fired from his bookkeeping job after thirty years with the same company. Now he was moving to Puerto Rico, where he hoped his experience would out-weigh his age when it came to finding another job. I couldn't help thinking that he was seeking an answer to his own *where* and *how* as much as to the waiflike woman's.

The young woman shrugged, and smiled a little. She had the oddest smile – sad, fateful, dreamlike. "Prayers," she said. "My prayers. A few years ago I asked God to send me someone to love, and He did, and I married him. Now I'm asking God to help me find my husband again. That's all. Just asking. And I'm sure He will."

Time passed, trancelike, the way it does on shipboard, the young woman leaning against the rail watching the flying fish skitter across the cobalt sea, the engineer and I on the fantail, the old man asking the bishop's wife for ideas about getting a job in Puerto Rico.

We docked in San Juan early one morning. I was scheduled to catch another boat that afternoon for St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, and so had a few hours to kill. The others were going to look for an inexpensive hotel where the young woman could stay while she figured out her next move, whatever that might be. The engineer and the old man needed a place to stay too. The bishop's wife had delayed her own trip to Ponce, where the bishop was, in order to give some reassurance to the young wife. "I've got to see her settled somewhere," she said to me privately. "And then I'll ask some people at the church to keep an eye on her."

In the smothering heat of midday we walked all over the old city of San Juan, finding the cheap hotels – all run-down establishments infested with fleas and bedbugs. Finally, the bishop's wife suggested that we get on a bus for the neighboring town of San Terce. She thought accommodations might be more attractive and more available there.

So we clambered onto a bus for San Terce, but all the hotels we found in this pleasanter suburb were too expensive. Eventually, exhausted under the hot sun, the bishop's wife, the old man and the young woman sat down on a sidewalk bench. The engineer and I continued the search, and, amazingly, we found a pleasant, clean and inexpensive hotel within a block.

We tried to register for the group, but the clerk insisted that each person register individually. So the others lined up before the registration book. When it was the woman's turn to sign, she picked up the pen, glanced at the page, dropped the pen – and fainted.

The clerk dashed for some water. The engineer and I put her on a couch, and the bishop's wife bathed her forehead while the old man patted her head. She came to slowly.

"Heat too much for you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No . . . Billy."

"Billy?"

"He's in the book," she whispered.

We jumped up to take a look. There scrawled after a date two days before, we read: "Billy Simpson."

"What room is he in?" I asked the clerk. I couldn't believe it.

"Simpson?" the clerk said, "Oh, he got a job. He came back after work. Not here now."

"This can't be," the old man said almost angrily. "She must have had some idea that he was here!"

The bishop's wife looked at us. "No, I'm sure she didn't," she said. "Otherwise she would have come directly to this hotel on her own, wouldn't she?"

Nobody could answer that. Now, I know that in a good story the narrator does not remove himself from the scene just when the climactic episode is coming up. But this is the way it all happened. Real life doesn't always write the script the way a good playwright would.

Anyway, I had to be on the boat that sailed to the Virgin Islands. The engineer shook my hand and wished me well. The bishop's wife gave me a letter of introduction to the Episcopal minister on St. Thomas, a Reverend Edwards. The old man said he would come to see me off.

The boat was belching smoke, more of a ferry than a ship. As we neared the gangway, the old man spoke.

"The real reason I wanted to come along was to ask you something. Do you think that prayer really led that woman to her husband?"

"I don't know," I replied uneasily. "There's always coincidence. But this is certainly a big coincidence."

"I wonder if prayer could help me?" he said. "I don't know much about it."

"Neither do I," I said. "Why don't you ask the bishop's wife?"

"Do you think I should? I've been a bit afraid to."

"Sure," I said. "Ask her. And if I hear of any jobs in the Virgin Islands, I'll write you at the hotel."

"Thanks," he said. "Have a good trip."

When I arrived, Reverend Edwards invited me to stay with him, charging a small amount per week for room and board. Settled in, I spent my time sightseeing, chatting with natives at the docks, writing, relaxing, learning all I could about the islands. I often visited with Reverend Edwards after dinner. One night I told him about the young woman on the boat and missing husband and the prayers. I'm sure my tone indicated my doubts.

The old clergyman said, "Don't ever be afraid to believe, John. You're too young to have a closed mind."

With time, the woman and Billy Simpson almost slipped from memory. But one day I mentioned the incident to two new friends of mine, deaconesses who lived next door to the church.

“Why,” said one of them, “that sounds like a Mr. Simpson we had here at the clinic. He came from Antigua with a bad case of the D.T.’s. We practically had to chain him to a bed.”

“And then,” said the other, “one day he suddenly became alert and insisted on getting up. Our Danish doctor said he’d better stay with us for a time, but Mr. Simpson was adamant. He said he had to get to San Juan to see someone. When we asked who, he said he didn’t know. He just had to get to San Juan. That night he caught a small powerboat going to Puerto Rico. We gave him some money to get him there and maybe enough for a room. That’s the last we heard of him.”

We compared dates, and this Mr. Simpson would have landed in Puerto Rico three days before my group arrived. He could have reached that hotel before we had, as the register showed.

I had to find out. I wrote to the bishop’s wife, gave her my news and asked for hers. In two weeks, her answer came: “Yes, it was the right Billy Simpson. His reunion with his wife was one of the most touching things I’ve ever seen. Now, there are several events to consider, miracles possibly. One, Mr. Simpson’s sudden cure from alcoholism in St. Thomas, which he confirms; two, his strange compulsion to get San Juan, which he couldn’t understand at the time; three, the guidance that led him to that hotel; four, his finding a good job within twenty-four hours, after not being able to get a job for months; and five, the guidance that took our group to that hotel. For me, these events add up to a hatful of miracles that can be explained in only one word: Prayer. The Simpsons are living happily in San Juan now. Not long ago they gave me some money to use for a charity, and so I am enclosing funds for your friends who helped Mr. Simpson while he was ill.”

A week later, I received a letter from the old man. He had gone to Ponce with the bishop’s wife, found a good job, joined the church and become very happy in it. He wrote: “When we were at the hotel that day, Mrs. Colmore said that maybe there was a lesson in the experience we had shared. I believe there was. For me, the lesson was that some people instinctively know the power of prayer, but others have to learn it.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

How to Listen to God by Doug Hill, pages 18-23. Used with permission

Story 2**'Abundant Answers' by M. L. Carney**

Our daughter Amy Jo's moved back in with us. She enrolled in a full-time master's program at a nearby university, but was feeling restless and unsure about the future. "You know," she said one night as she was setting the table, "I used to talk about going to law school. Remember?"

I did remember. She had only been about ten when she first brought it up. And while she'd mentioned it a few times during the years, it somehow had fallen by the wayside as she got a degree in communications, took a job and got married. Now it was surfacing again. "I remember," I said, "but I'm not sure if that's what you should do now or not." Silently, I wondered where she would get the money. "Just pray about it..." I said.... The words sounded frail. Wasn't there something else she should be doing?

A few minutes later, Amy Jo came back..., beaming. She spread out the Chicago Tribune on the table and pointed to a classified ad: "Wondering if law school is right for you? Work for us and decide!" It was a large law firm in Chicago, an easy train ride from where we lived. So Amy Jo took the job, working for a year as a court runner. She loved it! Then she took her admissions test and enrolled in Valparaiso University, where she went on to law.

I've always believed in answered prayer. But these days I'm looking for those answers in lots of places. My Bible, of course. But also in the "thought for the day" that appears on my e-mail. Or in the overheard wisdom of an older woman in line at the grocery talking – on a cell phone – to her daughter. And, yes, maybe even in the newspaper. As for the financial problem of law school – Amy Jo is on full scholarship, which is something we both prayed about!

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Discussion questions

Question 1: Underline the place/places where the person(s) received guidance. Briefly describe how the person received guidance from God in answer to prayer.

Question 2: How did this story affect you?

Question 3: Does it remind you of something in your own life?

Question 4: Did you find it consoling, challenging, comforting? Why?

Question 5: In reflecting on one of these true, modern-day stories, what is the take-away for you?

V. Closing Prayer: The 12th Grade Prayer Card (5 min.)

Using the "Seeking God's Guidance" Prayer Card, pray the front side together as a group.