

Session 8: God will offer us guidance in our thoughts. (Part 2)

I. Opening Prayer

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

- “I will bless the LORD who counsels me; Indeed He instructs me in the night [in my thoughts]. I have set the LORD continually before me; Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.” Psalm 16:7-8
- “Your ways O Lord make known to me, teach me Your paths [in my thoughts]. Set me in the way of Your truth, and teach me, for You are the God who saves me and my hope is in You all day long.” Psalm 25: 4-5
- “Happy the man who listens to me, watching daily at My gates.” Proverbs 8:34
- “Be anxious for nothing, 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 **minds** through Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 4:6-7

II. The TEACHING for Session 6: God will offer us guidance in our heart.

God Offers Us His Guidance in Our Thoughts (Part 2)

God communicates with us through our thoughts. He helps us understand His truth, and our thoughts are a means of conversation and communion with Him. Further, God uses this gift of “thinking” that He has given us to provide direction for every aspect of our lives. He places helpful ideas in our heads.

We refer to thoughts from God as inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will teach us to recognize His inner promptings. He teaches us to recognize these movements during times of silence in prayer while “being with” God. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 1830, 1266) We do face a significant obstacle in recognizing thoughts from God through these inner promptings. Have you ever found yourself saying, “I can’t even hear myself think?” In today’s world, the onslaught of noise is continuous and is a serious hindrance to hear what God might speak to us in our thoughts. In the “Screwtape Letters,” the world renowned author C.S. Lewis expresses this point: One of the greatest hindrances that the enemy capitalizes on in today’s world is the increased noise and the lack of silence in people’s lives. The continuous noise proves to be a blockage for people who are sincerely seeking God and who want to hear His voice. The enemy attempts to load us up with noise so that we are greatly hindered from any ability to hear God’s voice speaking quietly to us. A way of facilitating the process of listening to our thoughts, and what God might want to speak to us through them, is to provide times of quiet both around us and within us so that we can “hear” any promptings from God through His Holy Spirit.



The good news is that many are recognizing the effects of little or no silence in their lives and the resultant loss of interior peace. Constant noise and thoughts running through our minds allows minimal opportunities to listen to God. There is a growing interest to learn to quiet down and rest in the presence of God, which can become prayer – a conversation with God. A line from Scripture captures this point. In Psalm 46 we read: *Be still and get to know Me.* (verse 10)

When we are quieter, by having times of silence, we are more available to God; we are more fully alive, more peaceful and joyful. We can then recognize more clearly that every person has been created absolutely unique in God’s eyes. Blessed John Henry Newman wrote that God has created us at this particular time, with a particular mission for us that will bring us profound peace and joy, and no one else can fulfill the mission to which God has called us. This is why having times of quiet prayer is so essential so that we can hear from Him.

There is a person who can model for us how to have an ongoing exchange of thoughts and words – a conversation – with God. Brother Lawrence was a 16th Century Carmelite monk who served in the kitchen of a Parisian monastery. His simple way, as expressed in his book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, is a helpful light and guide to many people who seek to know God, and how He always desires to guide us, when we intentionally practice conversing with Him.

As suits a humble monk, Brother Lawrence’s desire was simple: He persevered in focusing his attention on Jesus Christ no matter what he was doing. He spoke with God while he washed the dishes and he thanked and praised God when he mopped the floor. He sang to God in his heart, sometimes out loud, while he placed tableware out for the evening meal and He asked for God’s blessing while he cleared the table. As time went on, Brother Lawrence became continually mindful of God and recognized how Jesus Christ dwelled within His soul. Even amidst “the noise and clatter of my kitchen,” he stated, “while different people are talking at the same time, I am united with God in great peace as if I am alone with Him in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.”

The best way to become more aware of God’s presence is our focused attention. The more we turn our thoughts to God, the more we will recognize – be tuned into – how He is willing to guide us in our thoughts. There are very simple things that we can do so that we will begin to think of God more often and be more available for Him to speak to us in our thoughts:

- Take opportunities during any free given moment to be quiet and reflect on the reality of the presence of God right there with you. Make a practice of being aware of God's continual presence.
- Make a decision to “on purpose” turn your attention to Our Lord, for example, as you wait in line for lunch, prepare for a test, as you take a test, walk to your next class, prepare for after-school activities, clear your dishes and prepare for bed.



The example of “taking a test” is captured in a cartoon showing two students walking down the hall. One student says, “I don’t care what they say, as long as we have tests in school, we are going to have prayer in school.” The other student replies, “You got that right!”

- You may repeat a one-line prayer that you know, such as “Help me, Jesus!” or “Jesus, guide me!” or “Thank you, Jesus” or “Jesus, I trust in You!”
- Spend some set-apart, quiet time on a daily basis – no matter how short – to converse with Jesus, to build your relationship with Him as you would with a friend. As you share your thoughts and feelings with Him, you will begin to sense the reality of His caring Presence in the everyday moments of your life and how He will guide you in all their details.

Discussion questions for small groups

Question 1. What stood out for you? or What resonated most with your personal situation currently? Why? Summarize below.

Question 2. Why is quiet time needed in order to receive guidance from God?

Question 3. Consider when it might be possible to choose to have a little more quiet time in your life. For instance: not playing music when you are driving for ten minutes; making a choice to put social media on hold for a small amount of time. It might seem “boring” at first, but you will quickly come to see the benefits.

Question 3. Summarize in one or two sentences what your takeaway is from this section.

Question 4. If you were going to relate something from “God will offer us guidance through our thoughts” 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 resonated with you in connection with your own life experience?

III. God guides us in Scripture through the author of Proverbs regarding our thoughts.

Look up and read Proverbs 3: 5-6.



I walked out of the apartment house and headed down Rue Bliss. Just as I approached the Saudi Arabian Embassy compound, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to face a bearded young man who jammed a green pistol in my stomach.

"You come," he muttered, motioning me to a small gray sedan at the curb. He shoved me into its backseat and, as the car accelerated, growled, "Close eyes! You see, I kill!"

Soon the car stopped. A rag was tied around my eyes and I was hustled into what seemed to be a back room.

"Why have you kidnapped me?" I demanded.

"You are spy."

"No, I'm a television journalist."

"You are CIA."

"No!" I protested. And then: "Is my wife safe? What have you done to her?"

"We do not harm women."

After more questioning, I was gagged and, still blindfolded, tightly wrapped from head to feet with packing tape, carried out and dumped on what felt like a truck bed. An engine roared, and after two and a half hours of jouncing, the truck stopped. I was dragged out, the tape unwound and, with feet and legs tingling, was led stumbling up stairs to what seemed to be a tiny room. A steel chain was tightened on my left wrist and fastened to a wall. The chain was only two and a half feet long. I wasn't able to stand. I could only sit or lie on my left side or back.

A pistol barrel was shoved under my blindfold.

"Blindfold okay, you okay," a voice intoned. "Blindfold not okay, you not okay." The trigger was pulled, clicking loudly in my ear.

Footsteps left the room, a door slammed and I slumped onto a thin foam-rubber pallet. I knew from their conversation that my captors were Muslim Shiites. They were fanatics. They could hold me here indefinitely.

Two guards came in. They led me blindfolded to an adjoining toilet, letting me know that I was to relieve myself only once a day. As I walked with them, they seemed to enjoy poking and pinching me. After knocking on the toilet door to be let out, I was taken back to my room and chained. Alone again, I peeked under my blindfold to see dingy walls and a painted-over window. Some food had been left for me: dry pita bread and two little foil-wrapped triangles of cheese.

The room had an icy chill to it, and even in my sport coat and sweater, with ragged blankets pulled around me, I shivered. I tried to sleep, but was waked constantly by the clanking chain. Finally the day ended.

The next day came. Then the next one like the other, and soon they blurred together. The only way I could tell when night had come was by the changes of light in the room.

By scratching tallies on the wall, I watched a week grind by, then two. My left shoulder ached from lying on it. My leg muscles cramped and spasms shook my body. My stomach ached from hunger. But worst of all was the worry about my family. I knew I had to do something to keep my mind occupied. I tried thinking pleasant thoughts. There was my tenderhearted, loving, perpetually-in-motion wife of seven years, whom everyone called "Sis." There was the wonderful ready-made family she had given me, five incredible young people ages eighteen to twenty-nine.



I created lists in my head, all the operas I had seen, the original major-league baseball teams, the parks they played in when I was a youngster. I formed a list of the starters on the World Series Champion Detroit Tigers, the team from the city where I grew up.

But always the cold and pain dragged me back to reality. Shifting my thinning arms and legs on the soiled pallet, I tried again to “escape,” this time by reliving my favorite pastime – grand opera. I pictured the curtain rising on Beethoven’s *Fidelio*. It was easy to see myself as the political prisoner Florestan’s wife Leonore coming to save him. “I see her, an angel.” he sings. “She leads me to freedom . . .!” And I envisioned Sis coming to rescue me.

The words of Beethoven resounded in my memory – Beethoven, who defeated deafness and adversity. “I will not submit,” he once wrote. “I will take my fate by the throat. It shall not overcome me . . . I shall shout! I shall sing! Man. Help yourself! For you are able!”

But positive thinking could not ease my terrible loneliness. Aching for someone to talk to, I began talking to myself, then stopped. Would I become like those demented people I’d seen babbling to themselves on the street?

But I had to talk to someone. The guards? That was hopeless, for outside of a few grunted commands they left me alone, not even taunting me anymore at the toilet. Then who? As my mind searched, I began to think about God.

As an atheist I shrank from the idea. Yet I kept thinking about Him. I wrestled with the thought. Everything I had heard or read about God began coming back to me.

Who can grow up in America without hearing about God, from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to overhearing a street preacher, or catching a few words of an evangelist before switching television channels?

Words surfaced in memory: “God loves you” . . . “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Even snatches of what little I had read in the Bible came back to me. Yet trying to remember what I heard was like a thirsty man holding his mouth open to raindrops.

I kept thinking about Sis. She had never pushed her beliefs on me. But I couldn’t help note that she lived her Christian convictions – sometimes, I felt, to the point of impracticality. I always felt she forgave others too easily, especially when they hurt her badly. I was not a forgiving person.

As I thought more and more about the help of other people seemed to receive through their faith, it began to make more sense. *Could it be, I wondered, that this “God” they believed in was real? Could I talk to Him?*

Then I caught myself. I realized that before I spoke one word to God, I would have to believe in Him too. If I started talking to God with even one millionth of one percent of doubting His existence, I wouldn’t really be talking to Him, I would be deluding myself, and I felt I surely would go crazy, like those poor demented people on the street.

It was a cosmic Catch-22.

That I had not bathed in four weeks, that my rank, filthy clothes stuck to me, was not important now. I was consumed with pondering everything I had heard about God and the other one called his Son, Jesus. Closer and closer I approached a spiritual Rubicon; if I crossed the boundary of believing in God, I would be committed irrevocably to Him and His Son.

Then came April 10 – and then, one moment in that day. Before it, I was not sure. After it, I knew: He was real.



My first words to Him were simple: *Oh Father, please take care of my wife and family. Please reunite us.*

Then I did what I would never have done before. I forgave my captors – and asked God to forgive them too.

For the first time in my life I felt whole. Strange, I thought, to be cold and starving, and yet feel so well.

With Someone to talk to, I found my life in my cell taking on a new dimension. I felt more sure of myself. When left alone in the bathroom I pressed my eye to a tiny scratch in the painted window. Looming across the valley was the easily recognizable white ridge of Mount Lebanon. We were in the Bekaa Valley, near the city of Baalbek.

Could I escape? Just as the idea rooted and began to grow, my guards took away my eyeglasses and shoes. Could they possibly sense what was going on in my mind?

Now I was taken to another house. It was May and the Mediterranean heat pressed down. Sweating in my underwear, stung by mosquitoes, this time I was chained to a radiator.

But what was that? Knocks sounded on the bathroom door adjoining me. There were other people nearby. Prisoners like me?

On July 5, four months after my capture, I was taken to a room where I was made to read a statement for videotaping. The statement urged our government to intercede with the government of Kuwait to free seventeen Shiite Muslims convicted of bombing the American and French embassies there. At last, for the first time I knew why I was being held captive. I also knew that our government had declared that it would not deal with terrorists. No matter what happened, I now felt there was a strong possibility that I would end up dead. I was moved to another house, and then to another, but all in the same area.

The guards were becoming careless. They didn't always keep the chain as tight as they once had. But what difference did it make? A severe intestinal infection now left me helpless. For weeks I writhed with stomach spasms and diarrhea. Finally the guards brought a doctor who gave me pills. They helped.

December brought freezing temperatures. I huddled, teeth chattering, under blankets. *How ironic, I thought, that this would be the first real Christmas of my life. How would I celebrate it? Would the guards bring a hot meal as they had done occasionally?* Then I realized that just by knowing the One whose birthday it was would be celebration enough.

The shocker came on Christmas Eve. One of the guards actually wished me a "joyous Noel" and handed me a chocolate cake, oranges, grapes, some Lebanese Christmas cards and, of all things, a ballpoint pen!

I got a second shock when he said, "Your wife is in the Middle East talking about peace and asking about you." I had been certain that she wouldn't take my kidnapping sitting down, but the extent of her efforts was still surprising.

Then I got a third shock. The guard asked, "What do you want for Christmas?"

I looked up at him in astonishment.

"A Bible!" I blurted.

Two days later he handed me a small red-bound New Testament, a Berkeley translation from the Gideons.

I thanked him, and the instant he left I lifted my blindfold and began devouring it. I used my new pen to underline passages that had special meaning to me. Day after day I drank



deeply from it. In searching for direction to help me pray more effectively. I read in Matthew, “And everything you ask in prayer you will obtain, if you believe.” Then I came to a similar passage in Mark where, in telling His disciples how to pray, Jesus said, “. . . whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.”

This hit me like a thunderbolt. Jesus didn’t simply say, “Believe you will receive.” He said that when you pray, believe you already have it.

I stared at this revelation, my mind reeling with its limitless implications. For the first time I realized that, despite my chain, my cell, my guards, I was free, really free.

I was moved again to another house. From knocks on the door of an adjoining bathroom I deduced that new hostages had been added. Now I felt certain that our government was sticking to its no-negotiation, no-deal policy, and in angry frustration my captors were taking more hostages. I thought that if they did not get what they wanted, eventually they would kill me.

I prayed for a chance to escape, believing that I could. On the night of February 13, more than eleven months after my capture, a guard was again careless with the chain. I could get away. Late that night I listened. It was quiet.

I tied three blankets together, then carefully pushed open the window to a second-story balcony overlooking a mountainside. I tied one blanket to the railing and then lowered myself to the ground. The frozen earth chilled my shoeless feet.

The city seemed to be asleep. Heart pounding, I began to run, zigzagging down the mountainside. As I reached a road, a dog barked, I froze. Another joined in and soon a whole pack was howling. Then came the concerned mutter of voices.

My captors?

In panic I flattened myself under a truck on the cold gravel. Flashlights raked the dark, footsteps crunched closer. A light swept across the gravel; I squirmed from it but it slanted across my feet.

Guns went off and men started shouting Arabic, which I did not know. It seemed as they were telling me to get out from under the truck.

Trembling, I crawled out and stumbled toward the blinding light. Then I saw red berets. They were Syrian soldiers, friendly Syrians bemused by the wild-looking shoeless man in a dirty warm-up suit babbling at them in English and fractured French. I was safe. I was free.

Two days later I held Sis tightly in my arms at the Frankfurt Airport in Germany. Our ordeal was over.

Now I carry the gift my captors gave me at Christmas, the little New Testament. I look at it daily and often think about the reasons for my captivity. When I do, I am reminded of Joseph’s words to his brothers, who had sold him into slavery: “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20, RSV). And I believe that, like Joseph, my captivity wasn’t meant just for my good – by leading me to my faith – but also for the good of the hostages I left behind when I fled my lonely cell. Now I at least had the chance to help them.

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Story 2 **'Use the Health You Have' by Linda Williams**

It happened in the dentist's office two weeks before I was to be married. I had gone in to have a wisdom tooth pulled. "You don't want a toothache on our honeymoon!" David had urged me.

"All done!" the dentist said, bringing the chair upright. "All done," he repeated when I didn't get up.

I couldn't move. I was hurried to a hospital, where doctors attributed the strange paralysis to the anesthetic used by the dentist.

Very slowly, movement returned. I remained in the hospital for a month, and it was six months before I could return to nursing school. David still wanted to get married right away, but I insisted on waiting. What if it hadn't been the anesthetic? How could I ask David to take on a sick wife?

We were young; I was twenty, he was twenty-three. We could afford to wait. I completed nurse's training and got a hospital job. The paralysis did not recur. There were a few unrelated things – or so I thought. Days when my vision blurred. Sometimes at the end of my shift my left foot would start to drag. "You're just working too hard," David would say. Three years after our original wedding date, we were married.

The following year Jenifer was born; two years later, Trisha. Was the string of complications – dizziness, kidney infections, ulcers – pregnancy-related, as the obstetrician assured me?

Wanting to raise our family in the country, we brought a secondhand mobile home on fifteen acres in Washington State. I worked the 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. shift at Bess Kaiser Hospital in Portland, Oregon, thirty miles away, leaving when David got home from his work repairing welding equipment. Making my rounds, I began to notice that my whole left side often lagged behind the right.

David and I always got up at 5:00 a.m. to pray together before he left for work; daily now we asked for healing. I started losing weight so rapidly that the hospital shifted me to part-time work and put me through a battery of tests without arriving at a diagnosis.

Six years after the wedding I was down from 130 to only seventy-five pounds, and doctors insisted on putting me in the hospital. Two days after being admitted I woke up in the hospital room to discover I could not lift my head, legs, arms or hands. As in the dentist's chair ten years earlier, there was no response.

By week's end catheters and feeding tubes were keeping me alive. Around me the room darkened. Finally I knew when it was daytime only by asking the nurse. Then, as the paralysis spread to my throat, I could not even do this.

Finally, a specialist confirmed I had multiple sclerosis.

As a nurse I was all too familiar with this disease, which progressively destroys the nerves. I was thirty years old and I realized I might be dying.

After two months in the hospital, I was to be released to a nursing home. Blind, mute, paralyzed, I would require total care. David held my unresponding hand as the doctor named several institutions. "You can look at them, Mr. Williams, and let me know."

"I don't need to look at them." That was David's voice. "Linda is coming home."



And over the doctor's protests, home I went. I was sure that at six and four, Jenifer and Trisha would be terrified by the forest of tubes. But I heard only excitement in their voices: "Mommy's home!"

Mommy? What kind of mother could I be as I waited for death in that little mobile home?

Attended by nurses the insurance paid for, I lay week after week, unable to move or see or speak, wanting the end to come quickly. Worse, God, who had always been so close, now seemed a million miles away. I knew God could heal because I had watched Him do it for patients I had prayed for. But when I prayed about my own health, there was no answer.

You have health. Use it.

I had . . . what? Where had such a ludicrous thought come from? Certainly not from me. I was sick. Helpless. Why, the only part of my body I could move was a single finger on my right hand!

Then move that finger.

There in the dark, I moved that one finger. A mere quiver, but I moved it. Next day, and the next, and the one after that, I took my mind off all I could not do and focused it on that responsive muscle. Physically it was a movement of centimeters, but in my understanding, a journey of light-years. Instead of bombarding Heaven for healing, I was to concentrate on the health I had.

Hearing, for example! I could hear the wind in the firs, the chatter of the girls as they dressed their dolls.

Thought! I could reason. I could pray – thanking God for husbands, for children, for Himself.

What could a single finger do? Gesture a greeting when I heard footsteps in the room!

One day as I "waved" at David this way, a second finger trembled into motion. A week later I coaxed a few croaking sounds from my throat. Soon afterward I saw one blur of brown and another of yellow beside the bed. The darker was Jenny's brunette curls, the yellow one, blonde Trisha.

As my sight improved and more muscles responded in my right hand and arm, I discovered an amazing range of activity within inches of me. Jenny and Trish developed an uncanny ability to make sense of my garbled speech. With the girls translating, I communicated an idea to David. Would he wedge pillows behind me till I was sitting up? Would he put my sewing machine on the bed table? And now, would he tuck the foot treadle beneath my right arm?

So it was that the girls and I began making their spring wardrobes. They cut the fabric and guided it through the machine, but I was the one who used the bit of motion I had to start and stop the needle.

Doctors cautioned that such temporary reversals were not unusual with MS. A patient could improve, but sooner or later the disease might reassert itself.

I had stopped focusing on the disease, however, simply enjoying each gift of health. Like the time when, strapped in a wheelchair, I was first wheeled out of the bedroom. Like teaching the girls to cook. (They pushed me into the kitchen, and together we baked bread, and made soups and pies.) David built a ramp beside the front steps so that I could be wheeled outside. When growing season came, he mounted a foam-rubber pad on a board with wheels,



narrow enough to be pulled between rows of beans and carrots. Lying face down I dug my fingers into the damp soil.

Use the health you have, God kept telling me, and how many uses there were for each regained ability! Much as I had improved, it was obvious that I couldn't go back to nursing, not in a wheelchair. But there were so many things I *could* do. Parenting, for example – teaching, encouraging, loving. When we learned that our church supported an orphanage in Guatemala, we asked to be considered as an adoptive family, and two years later four-year-old Sarah became ours.

Caring for a small child used every ounce of health I had. And the more health I used, the more seemed to come. To continue the stretching, as Sara grew older, I enrolled in foster-care classes offered by the state social agency, and proudly heard our home declared “ideally suited for nurturing children.”

But MS was advancing again. Breathing was often a struggle, even with oxygen. Time after time I was admitted to the hospital pronounced terminal, but survived to return home once more. To use the health I had was hard, as the pain in my abdomen became constant. A postsurgical patient is given ten milligrams of morphine; ten years after the diagnosis of MS I was receiving four hundred milligrams a day.

When even this was not enough, in August two years later, surgeons proposed severing my spinal cord. That would mean I'd never walk again – but of course I couldn't anyway. Another option was partial removal of my digestive tract. As it was eleven years since I'd taken food by mouth, this too would make no difference.

My reason for refusing both procedures must have seemed ridiculous; the conviction that God was still saying, You have health. Use it.

A few months later after surgeons' radical proposals, our first foster child was placed with us. With my mounting handicaps I would never have attempted it alone, but our three girls were so eager that we went ahead. Already a veteran of twelve foster homes at age three, Brandon was a silent child who never smiled. It was a joy to see him soon turning into a lively, laughing little boy who could never get enough hugs.

One day I was wheeling about the kitchen getting Brandon's lunch when I heard an unfamiliar sound: the growling of my own stomach. I stopped, peanut butter jar in hand. Was it time to attempt some food by mouth?

That day I sipped a teaspoon of watermelon juice, and the next day a swallow of carrot juice. Slowly I progressed to solid food, reveling in the forgotten sensation of taste. And strength began returning to my legs. One day David walked in from work to find me sitting on the couch. He looked from me to the empty wheelchair where he'd placed me that morning. “How . . . ? Who . . . ?

Eating. Walking. Driving a car. Coming off morphine. Addition after addition to my inventory of health. As my healing has progressed, more “problem” children have been entrusted to us: Autistic. Retarded. Deaf. The evaluations that accompany each child are accurate, just not important. Unique, lovable, brave – there is so much more to say about these children.

I have discovered, you see, that it's not what's wrong with us that counts, but what's right. That's what I told the neurologist recently when he showed me the results of my latest tests. “I don't understand it,” he said. “I see nothing but health here.”



“I know,” I told him. “I’ve seen nothing but health too, for a long, long time.”

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Discussion questions

Question 1: Underline the place/places *where* the person received guidance. Briefly describe *how* the person received guidance from God in their thoughts?

Question 2: How did this story affect you?

Question 3: Does this story or anything contained in it remind you of something in your life?

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

Question 5: In reflecting on this true, modern-day story, what is the take-away for you?

VI. Closing Prayer: The 12th Grade Prayer Card

Using the “Seeking God’s Guidance” Prayer Card, pray the front side.

