



LIZ DITTY

HEAR MY
PRAYER

LEARNING
FROM THE
FAITH OF
ELIJAH

 A 6-WEEK BIBLE
STUDY EXPERIENCE



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Taken from *Hear My Prayer* by Elizabeth Kimberly Ditty.

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INTRODUCTION

AS A LITTLE GIRL, I would stand in socked feet on top of my dad's shoes while he tried to teach me how to dance on the yellowed kitchen linoleum. "When it's your wedding, you dance with your dad first," he said sternly. "Only when I let the groom cut in can he take you out of my arms."

He couldn't know then that he was the one who would be taken from my arms, not the other way around. While people earnestly prayed outside his hospital room for a miracle, I did not. Stage-four brain cancer was something I prayed to accept, not for God to heal.

My wedding was only four months away, and the doctors believed he had six to twelve months to live. He might be in a wheelchair, but his goofy grin could still light up the dance floor. *I'm not even asking to keep him, Lord, just one last dance in the window you've already given him to live.* For all the deals humans have made with God, I was shooting for an easy yes.

When my dad took his last breath, I glanced down at my left hand resting near his knee. My engagement ring shimmered against the rough hospital blanket. It was ten weeks before my wedding day.

No one told me about the scars that calcify around unanswered prayers, or how to grapple with disappointment in God that wheels uncontrollably toward anger. I was distracted enough navigating the countless losses that rippled outward from losing my dad, and at the same time propelled forward by the excitement of starting a brand-new life with my husband. And life kept going.

I didn't stop believing in God, I couldn't lose him too. We had been through too much together and I was sure he had his reasons. I kept reading my Bible, continued to lead in our church, and I still prayed. But my prayers became . . . *small*.

Life without expectation isn't life without disappointment; it's life without hope.

My imagination of God had slowly shifted to someone I could trust for his vast knowledge and wisdom, but whose plan couldn't be changed by my prayers. A God who refused to answer the smallest, purest request from his loyal servant, for a reason too vast for me to know. When I was young, after I got shots at the doctor, I always got to drive through McDonald's and get an ice cream cone to take a little bit of the sting away. I figured God just wasn't that kind of Father.

I know my unanswered prayer is smaller than some of yours. Not trusting God to know and do good is the oldest mistake in the Bible. It's the fundamental lie that Satan told humans in the Garden of Eden, and it took me over a decade of unspoken prayers to realize I had begun believing it. My image of God had shifted toward wise and powerful, away from caring and kind.

Have you ever considered how your prayers (answered or not) have shaped your idea of what God is like? The way we talk to God—or don't—can reveal something hidden that we believe about who God is. *An inescapable part of prayer is getting comfortable in the presence of God.* For the next six weeks, we will move toward less awkward, more authentic conversations with God. We'll experiment with different ways to talk to God and practice holding—not hiding—our resistance to prayer that has settled in.

This Bible study will immerse us in the story of the prophet Elijah. You may have heard people talk about Elijah hearing God whisper to him in 1 Kings 19. James, the brother of Jesus, tells the story with a twist—Elijah didn't just listen to God, God listened to Elijah. When Elijah prayed, fire burst down from heaven, food appeared for the starving, and rain refused to fall. James doesn't put this forward as a mythic example or something only great prophets achieve; in James 5:17 he writes, "Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years."

I couldn't imagine praying for rain or fire or resurrection like Elijah, even if he was human. When Jesus' disciples wondered how to pray, he taught them with his prayer.



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This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:9-13)

It turns out the things Jesus taught his followers to pray for were just the kind of things that Elijah prayed for, that James reminded the early church they could pray for, and that humans like us have prayed for ever since. Let’s spend some time in Jesus’ prayer with the human Elijah and see if we can find the same courage, wonder, and new life that he found in his conversations with God.

In Sunday school I was taught that God answered every prayer with one of three answers: yes, no, or wait. God always seemed to answer mine with silence, which was supposed to be a no or wait, and that never felt like much of an answer at all. I now know that God answers my prayers in an infinite number of ways. Sometimes he answers a prayer about my job with a word from someone else about my identity. Sometimes when I pray for my kids’ health, he answers with his own calming presence. There are more than three answers. They don’t fit on a traffic light. *God has as many words and ways to meet us as a living, breathing, eternally wise, and boundlessly loving Father.* I wonder what prayers we will bring to God in the coming weeks, or if those prayers will change, or how they will change us. All I can promise is that God is listening.



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WEEK 1

HONEST PRAYERS

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.*

*We must know before we can love. In order to know God,
we must often think of Him; and when we come to love Him,
we shall then also think of Him often, for our
heart will be with our treasure.*

BROTHER LAWRENCE

GROUP SESSION

We can be told God is all-powerful, all-knowing, or always present—but none of that matters if we don't know that he's also good.

GETTING STARTED

Prayer is a conversation, and our conversations vary wildly depending on who we're talking to and our relationship with them.

We're not only going to spend the next six weeks studying prayer—but we're also going to pray! Turn to the back of this book to the Daily Prayer Commitment Tracker, and we'll start our work for Day 4 early. What prayer goal could you set for yourself every day this week, even if it is something small?



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VIEW THE WEEK ONE VIDEO

Notes

- Elijah was a complex human.

- Elijah's story is more than a highlight reel.

- Elijah's prayers were honest.

DISCUSS

1. What are your clearest memories that have shaped your understanding of what God is like?

2. Take a look at this list of ways the Bible describes God:

Compassionate	Kind	Patient	Loyal
Forgiver	Judge of evil	Healer	Provider
Wisdom	Comfort	Worthy	Creator
Powerful	Victory	Protector	Peace
Vindicator	Freedom	Second chances	Joyful

3. Which attributes do you know to be true about God? Circle the ones that resonate with you most, or make a note if there is an important one that is missing from this partial list.

4. Is there a reason or an experience that made those attributes stand out to you?

5. Are there any truths about who God is that you wish were more evident in your own experience of him? How can the people surrounding you help you pray with hope for God to be visible in those ways right now?



ALL TOGETHER: GOD IS LIKE . . .

Materials needed: Leaders can head to www.lizditty.com/prayer to print out the metaphor tiles, then lay them face up in a place that is easy for everyone to see.

What is God like? Our attitude toward prayer is determined by our understanding of who God is. What would he be like if he were in the same room as you? What would he say or do? Would he sit or stand? Roll his eyes? Laugh? Scowl? We all have life experiences, or family traditions, or stories we have picked up from somewhere that shape our idea of what God is like.

Words can only describe so much. Choose a photo tile from the previous page that represents something about your impression of God.

1. What aspect of God's character or your relationship with him does this image capture?
2. Were there any images that did not resonate at all?
3. How could knowing and remembering who God is change the way you talk to him?
4. If you are comfortable, share your responses.

PRAYING TOGETHER: TO THE RIGHT (15 minutes)

Closing the group time, take the opportunity to share where in your life you would like to see God move in all his glory and goodness. Listen closely to the person sitting on your right. After everyone has shared, go around the circle again and pray for the person to your right.

SOLO STUDY

Some easy adjustments if you are on this journey with us, but without a group:

- Choose your photo tile(s) and journal your answers to the prompts.
- Share one of your favorite memories of connecting with God—with a person you know or on social media.
- The next time someone mentions something worrying them, ask if you can pray for them.

DAY 1

Read Luke 18:9-14

Our posture when we pray has to do with our image of God and also our image of ourselves. In his Gospel, Luke loves to tell the stories of reversals. This parable is no exception. While I'm not sure either character is fully relatable for me (they are extreme opposites), the story still feels familiar. Jesus warns us about one posture in prayer while praising another, so we'll look at both as well as other prayer postures that are common today.

OVERLY CONFIDENT POSTURE

Your anxiety about praying in public may ramp up as you realize you have begun a group study on prayer. When you look at this Pharisee, you should begin to feel better. The Pharisees were the religious elite of Jesus' day. They had intense theological training and a mountain of knowledge about laws and culture. They knew lots of Scripture by heart and were the spiritual luminaries in every room they entered. Sometimes, if we're new to praying in groups or tend to be more introverted, we might think we're missing something important or don't know how to pray. This man had everything we think we're supposed to have, and Jesus said his prayer was pretty terrible. Why?

When we read it, it's easy to see pride, entitlement, and looking down on others. Our prayers aren't a performance to make us look good or sound good



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to anyone who can hear. Jesus told this parable to people who loved the sound of their own voice as a big warning that our attitude will ruin our prayers much faster than our words.

HUMBLE POSTURE

The second man had a simple prayer, acknowledging his need for mercy. When we hear of someone beating their chest, it sounds a bit dramatic and attention drawing; don't worry, that is not our activity today! In that social context, this man was publicly expressing his repentance. In this great reversal, Jesus contrasted the most respected person in society—the Pharisee—with the least respected, most hated person. Tax collectors were stereotypically sellouts to Israel's political oppressors, who ignored the laws the Pharisees kept and were considered greedy thieves. God doesn't see what we see, though. He sees the posture and the heart of the prayer, not the person's words or reputation.

The postures of prayer that most tempt me to close off from God are slightly different from these. I wonder if they feel familiar to you, or if you have others you would add.

TENTATIVE POSTURE

One of the biggest hurdles to prayer is simply being unsure of what to say or how to say it. I know many people who struggle with knowing how formal to be or with not wanting to talk casually to God. Does prayer have to be a set-aside time with intentionality, or does it count to whisper your need for a parking space? When you approach God are you nervous that you aren't allowed to be there? It can be helpful to build familiarity over time; you don't have to talk to God as if he's your best friend if he isn't. Hopefully at the end of this week, you can begin to be more comfortable with not only the greatness but also the goodness and patience of God.

SKEPTICAL POSTURE

Does prayer actually change anything? One of the most common enemies of prayer is believing we don't need it or prayer doesn't change anything. Søren Kierkegaard observed, "The function of Prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." I will confess that prayer has not solved all the problems in my life, or even helped me understand them. Still it has helped



me walk through seemingly impossible things and connected me to others while doing that. It's true, what James 5:17 says—our prayers can be as powerful as those of Elijah or Jesus—but it's no guarantee that our prayers will always have the effect we want. If there is one thing that keeps me praying with hope in a world that can feel chaotic and unfair, it's prayer itself. There is no refuge from the unbearable like the presence of God; there's nowhere else I would rather be when I'm confused or stuck. Skepticism is lonely and unavailable for the surprise of answered prayer or maybe even a miracle; it doesn't protect us—it imprisons us.

We are all invited to pray with an open posture—not always perfect prayers or powerful prayers, but open, honest prayers, knowing who we are and who God is in the right proportions and letting our conversations with him change us as much as they change our circumstances.

REFLECTION: WELCOMING PRAYER

A humble posture in prayer doesn't always look like beating our chests, declaring what a big sinner we are. It can simply mean that we surrender to the wisdom and goodness of God instead of forcing our way. We walk through the hallway of our interior soul and remove the Do Not Enter signs we have posted on certain doors. There are parts of our thoughts or lives that we struggle to have God enter because we don't want him to change things or mess them up or tell us to do something we don't want to hear. These welcoming prayers will help us pray in an open posture. They have been adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.

Take a deep breath and choose three of these welcoming prayers to pray or make your own. Choose the areas you most need the goodness and greatness of God to be part of.

- Jesus, I let go of my need to control my relationships. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to control my career. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to control my circumstances. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to control newspaper headlines. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to control my mental health without help. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to control what other people think about me. Welcome.

- Jesus, I let go of my need to control my level of impact on the world. Welcome.
- Jesus, I let go of my need to control _____. Welcome.

DAY 2

In the Gospels, Jesus often goes off by himself to pray apart from his closest friends. The relationship Jesus had with his Father was eternal and incredibly close; Jesus said “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). But when Jesus took on a human body and the full human experience that goes with it, he talked to God by praying.

His disciples were curious about how to talk to God, so Jesus told them,

This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:9-13)

You might recognize these verses as the Lord’s Prayer, the outline for our six weeks together. They are the prayers Jesus teaches us to pray—and the kinds of prayers that Elijah prayed. We’ll explore these themes more in the coming weeks, but let’s notice that Jesus prayed like a human too. I wonder if it was strange for him, having always communicated one way with God, to pray to God instead. It makes me think of the first time my husband and I were apart for a week while we were still dating, and of just looking at him and knowing what he was thinking, I had to text him. I imagine Jesus aching to be with God, but he learned how to pray—and taught us.

Jesus knew God better than anyone else, and he wanted to make God known to us. Beyond his most famous prayer, Jesus told us a lot about what God is like and what prayer is like.



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Jesus also taught his disciples what God is like. For each of the passages below, draw a line to connect each passage with the summary of what Jesus is saying about his Father.

WHAT JESUS TEACHES US TO EXPECT FROM GOD IN PRAYER

Matthew 6:8 and
Matthew 6:32

God honors
persistent prayers.

Matthew 6:26 and
Matthew 10:29

When we feel unseen,
God sees us.

Luke 18:1-7

God cares about us.

Luke 18:11-13

God knows what
we need.

Matthew 6:6

God gives good gifts.

How does Jesus' list of what God is like compare to the list from the group session or the image you chose for yourself? List anything about God you appreciated being reminded about this week:

REFLECTION: WHO'S WHO

When we pray to God, we're praying to the entire Trinity of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Trinity plays an important part in our prayers.

What does God do as we pray? (Luke 11:9-13; 1 John 5:14-15)



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What does Jesus do as we pray? (Hebrews 4:14-16)

What does the Holy Spirit do as we pray? (Matthew 10:19-21; Romans 8:26-27)

What are you doing when you pray? (Ephesians 6:17-18; Philippians 4:6-7)

Do you feel like you need help to pray the kinds of prayers you want to pray, or to pray as much as you hope to, or to even pray at all? What kind of help could you ask for from the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or other humans who pray?

Many people don't give themselves enough credit for their prayer life. Saint Augustine wrote, "True, whole prayer is nothing but love." Do you find your mind drifting into a conversation with God as you fall asleep? Noticing his beauty and goodness in your life and giving him credit? Appreciating him as you listen to or sing certain kinds of music? All of that counts as love and prayer. Think of how the Holy Spirit might translate that in heaven.



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Jesus' prayer has been a model for me since childhood. I can't even recite "Our Father, who art in heaven . . ." without rolling out the words in a liturgical cadence. Those four concise verses have inspired countless meditations and writings, including mine. Not too long ago, though, my prayers felt like they were being whispered into a wilderness. It wasn't until I saw God respond to Elijah's prayers that my own prayers made sense to me.

In Elijah's story, I recognized my own fears, insecurities, expectations, and confusion. I can't wait for you to meet the God Elijah knew, the one we'll know better for having seen him through the prophet's eyes. Elijah's most famous prayer called down fire from heaven, but he prayed so many prayers before and after that—for justice, for the healing of others, and even one for giving up. Long before Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, Elijah intuitively prayed the kinds of prayers that Jesus said were possible. Elijah even had the audacity to ask God for things that no one else imagined were possible. We have so much to learn from him about trusting God to be closer than we realize—and just as much about relying on God when he appears absent. Jesus' brother James reminds us that Elijah was a *human just like us*: "Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years" (James 5:17).

Elijah's prayers were powerful because of the God he prayed them to. He had a lot of faith, but that's because Elijah knew the Father.

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"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Who taught Elijah what God was like? How did he know what kind of father he was praying to or what sort of things he could ask for?

There are a lot of things we don't know, but as a faithful Israelite, we can be relatively certain that Elijah was very familiar with the story of Moses. There are many, many

parallels between the life of Elijah and the life of Moses. I've included a few; take time to fill in the blanks.



PARALLELS BETWEEN THE LIVES OF MOSES AND ELIJAH

	MOSES	ELIJAH
ANGEL APPEARS	Exodus 3:2	1 Kings 19:5
DEBATE WITH GOD	Exodus 3:7–4:17	1 Kings 19:9-18
GOD GIVES AN ASSISTANT	Exodus 24:13	1 Kings 19:16
PRAYERS CONTROLLED FIRE	Number 11:2	1 Kings 18:38
	Exodus 16:4	1 Kings 17:6
	Exodus 19:18-19	1 Kings 19:9-13
	Numbers 11:14-15	1 Kings 19:4
	Exodus 24:18	1 Kings 19:8

This is not even a complete list! Elijah seems to take notes from Moses on performing signs and plagues to display God’s power to the royalty of their times, and Elijah was very aware of Moses’ warnings to God’s people who chose lesser gods.

As a faithful follower of God, Elijah would have been quite familiar with God’s words to Moses recorded in Exodus 34. This meaningful introduction God makes for himself is repeated throughout Scripture. (See also 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2.)

Take a pen or pencil and underline or circle all the characteristics of God.

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:5-7)

As you look over those words and phrases that describe God, consider how these truths might change the way you think about God or the kinds of prayers you pray.

If God is compassionate and gracious, then I can talk to God about . . .

If God is slow to anger, then I can talk to God about . . .

If God is abounding in love and faithfulness, then I can talk to God about . . .

If God is about forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin, then I can tell God about . . .

If God does not leave the guilty unpunished, then I can talk to God about . . .

Elijah expected God to be faithful to him, to show divine compassion to vulnerable people he knew, and to punish the evil in his world with a God-sized justice so that he didn't have to be anxious or vengeful himself. I'm not sure I always remember who God is when I pray to him. Do you?

REFLECTION: A SPOKEN WORD

This spoken word was written by Bre Erb in reflection on Elijah's relationship with God. When we begin to understand who God is, it changes the way we feel about being near him. Read it here or watch her performance on www.lizditty.com/prayer.



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EVER ENOUGH

God I've witnessed
First hand Your power
Like fire burning through
the sky,
I watched as each flame
swallowed the
shackles of sin,
Yet not one of my hairs
were singed.
No longer bound by flesh,
My knees buckled in
surrender,
They met the pavement
in an instant,
A cry of allegiance to You.
Miracle after miracle,
There's not enough ink in
the world to document
Your faithfulness,
Not just in my life
But in all of those who
bear Your image.
From the beginning of
creation
To this very second,
Not for one moment,
Have You left us forsaken.
Whether from brooks
Or by the mouths of ravens,
Your provision never ceases.
Yet I fail to see this

As I wander through desert
seasons.
Countless prayers have
slipped past my lips
Through clenched teeth
and doubt,
I wonder if my requests have
reached Heaven,
Or if in transit they got lost
among the stars.
As I wait,
I can't help but look back.
Comparing or re-creating
Your presence,
Desperate to witness a
glimpse of Your glory
Instead of trusting you're
there for me,
Hidden in the whispers of
cool and quiet caves.
Lord, I crave marvelous things,
Supernatural fire and winds
Parted seas and rain from
cloudless skies,
I
Am hardly satisfied with
simple whispers . . .
Yet it's in those moments,
I feel closest to You.

Will this ever be enough?



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