

TOWARDS STRENGTH
SE Online Bible Study
Spring 2026

Ephesians 4:15: “Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church...”

We know how to get in shape.

We may not actually be in shape, but it's not for lack of knowledge. The “secret” to getting ourselves in better health isn't really a secret at all. We know how to get there if we want to. It's fairly common knowledge that eating right, exercising more, and ending some of those bad habits (midnight Oreos as a purely hypothetical example) can help our physical health. Our problem isn't information, it's inaction. The steps to get stronger aren't unclear. They just require discipline.

What's true physically is also true spiritually. We all want to grow in our spiritual health. We want our faith to thrive and flourish in our lives. Just as with our physical health, the disciplines that would help us become spiritually stronger aren't secrets. In fact, they've been practiced since the early days of the church's existence. The book of Acts tells us that the first responders to the Gospel understood that baptism was only the beginning. Continuing on their journey would require ongoing dedication and discipline:

Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

Even in our language, the word ‘devoted’ speaks to an intense level of commitment. There are quite a few things in this life we would say we like – maybe even some we love – but there are only a few worthy of our devotion. In the Greek language, the word had a more vivid meaning. Formed by the combination of the words for ‘strength’ and ‘towards,’ the New Testament idea of devotion speaks of those things we would pour out every last bit of our energy for. To be devoted to something meant that you were willing to put all your strength towards it.

When Acts tells us that the first believers were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer, it's telling us that these were the non-negotiables. These were the things they lived for. They weren't just occasional activities. They were rhythms of life, habits of the heart. These disciplines shaped their faith and formed their community.

Their devotion to these four disciplines reminds us that spiritual strength, like physical strength, doesn't come from knowing what to do. It comes from actually doing it. Our spiritual lives are strengthened in the quiet moments of prayer, in the shared meals, in the study of Scripture, and in the presence of others who are walking the same path. Meeting Jesus in these four practices is not just how He grows us individually, it's how He grows His church. When we put our strength towards them, they lead us TOWARDS STRENGTH.

WEEK ONE: The Apostles' Teaching

Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the APOSTLES' TEACHING and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Brad Edwards: *"Luke's list isn't a description of four individual practices... What Luke actually says is that these reborn exiles devoted themselves (plural) to the spiritual greenhouse (singular) God "assembled" to cultivate a fourfold integrated life together in Christ: gathering for worship (the fellowship) to receive the preaching of God's Word (the apostles' teaching), take the Lord's Supper together (the breaking of bread), and actively depend on him (the prayers). Those are not individual, personal practices. They are the substance and shape of the body of Christ..."*

Books have incredible power. They can educate us and teach us new skills. They can make us see things differently and influence the decisions we make. They can inspire us to take risks that transform the world. Good books change your mind; the best books change your heart. Though the first Christians had no Bibles to speak of, they had something even better. They gathered to hear the stories of Jesus from the men who apprenticed with Him. As they heard the Apostles teach about all Jesus had said and done, their hearts filled with wonder. The miracles, the parables, the stories of His birth, and the stories of His death – all these teachings drove the early church forward on mission. The transformation that began in Jerusalem spread throughout the globe as those same stories were shared with person after person. The best books may change your heart, but the greatest book changed the world.

THEN: How Did They Practice It?

When Luke (the author of Acts) sat down to write his summary of the first church and its ministry in Jerusalem, he could have started by pointing out any number of things. He could have talked about the miracles and wonders performed by the apostles. He could have catalogued their benevolence work and the impact they had on the people of Jerusalem. He might even have provided us with the church's org chart and strategic plan to fulfill the mission Jesus gave them.

But Luke did none of those things.

Instead of focusing on the first church's plans, Luke told us about their priorities. As his mind drifted back to that budding community of believers, what stuck out to him the most were the day-to-day commitments they lived with. They were "devoted" to four practices – priorities that shaped them both individually and corporately. Though we often think of devotion in terms of love and affection, the Greek word goes a deeper than that. Combining the words for "Towards" and "Strength," the word Luke uses here speaks to something you pour effort into. It's not just about the way you feel, it's about the way you act. The early church didn't just practice these habits; they pursued them with all their strength.

The first of the habits Luke mentions is the early church's devotion to the "apostles' teaching." The church had a hunger to learn everything they could about who Jesus was and what He had done. More than that, they wanted to know how to become like Him. Who better to teach them about Jesus than those who had known Him the best? The apostles had heard every word Jesus taught. They had seen every miracle. They deciphered every parable. The church gathered to learn from the apostles just as they had learned from Jesus. In everything they did, the first Christians wanted to listen, to learn, and to live out the stories of Jesus.

As the church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching, this wasn't simply an academic exercise. The apostles weren't passing along abstract doctrines or distant memories; they were recounting living encounters with Jesus. Imagine gathering in a crowded room as Peter retold the moment he stepped out of the boat in faith, or hearing John describe what it was like to stand at the foot of the cross. Listening to the disciples' stories reminded the first Christians that the Jesus they followed was both real and relational! The apostles' teaching knit the believers together, grounding them in a shared story and a shared mission. Their devotion wasn't only about gaining knowledge – it was about becoming a community shaped by the words and ways of Jesus.

Acts 5:42: "And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: 'Jesus is the Messiah.'"

Preaching in Acts

Luke's summary in Acts 2:42 comes right on the heels of an incredibly significant sermon. On the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood up among the gathered crowd to proclaim Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection for the first time in history. His sermon (Acts 2:14-40) not only pointed them to the reality of those events, it also extensively quoted the Old Testament Scripture. Peter's sermon utilized Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110 to help the crowd understand the significance and meaning of what Jesus had done.

Other sermons recorded in the book of Acts show this same reliance on God's Word. In Acts 7, a deacon by the name of Stephen was seized by the Jewish authorities. He proceeded to preach to them from the books of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Amos, and Isaiah. In Acts 13, Paul preached a sermon in Antioch where he quotes from Deuteronomy, I Samuel, Isaiah, Psalms, and Habakkuk. In Acts 15, James taught the church using the prophet Isaiah.

The teaching of the early church leaders continually pointed believers back to the Old Testament Scriptures, reminding them that the story of Jesus had deep roots. It wasn't something that God had invented on the fly. Rather, He had been hinting at it and preparing for it since the dawn of time. Jesus wasn't an addendum on the Old Testament; He was the point and culmination of everything Moses and the prophets had written about!

ALWAYS: What Does the Bible Say About It?

The Bible has a lot to say about how we should use it. The pages of Scripture remind us that this is no ordinary book. Indeed, its power and purpose far exceed any other piece of literature. It doesn't intend to merely show us what's true, but to bring us face-to-face with the Truth. In its pages, we see who God is, what Jesus has done for us, and who we ought to be. A couple of New Testament passages, in particular, remind us that recognizing these truths ought to change the ways we think, feel, and act:

Hebrews 4:12: **“For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.”**

For the writer of Hebrews, the words of Scripture are more than ink on a page. They are the living, breathing words of God. They are a scalpel that cuts into our souls to expose its condition and heal its deepest hurts. Scripture is both the diagnosis and the cure. It tells us what's wrong with our hearts and points us towards the only One who can put them back together.

The words we read in the Bible are far more than stale ink on a static page. They are “alive and powerful.” They speak and move in ways that defy simple explanation. Have you ever opened up the Bible and found it speaking to a situation you were currently wrestling through? Have you ever listened to a sermon and felt as though the preacher was speaking directly to you? Has a verse of Scripture ever popped into your mind at the exact moment you needed it? These moments are not coincidence. We read Scripture, but Scripture also reads us. It knows where we hurt, where we resist, and where we need hope. And in meeting us there, it does what no other book can do—it draws us into the presence of the God who speaks, searches, and saves.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV): **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

Where the writer of Hebrews speaks of the Bible's nature in more symbolic terms, the apostle Paul gets more practical. Some of Paul's final words to his protégé Timothy speak not only of Scripture's nature, but of the reasons why God gave it to us. When we read the Bible, God intends for it to accomplish at least five purposes in our lives:

- The Bible is useful for **TEACHING**. It has things to teach us as we flip through its pages. There are truths we need to know if this life is going to make sense. Those truths can be as simple as a list of the kings of Israel or as profound as the nature of grace and faith. Any passage gives us the opportunity to learn something – whether it's something we learn about God, something we learn about ourselves, or something we learn about this world we live in.

- The Bible is useful for **REBUKING**. The Bible tells us what we need to stop doing. Though Scripture is filled with comforting truths, it also confronts us. It doesn't back down from telling us when what we're doing is wrong. We have to be willing to let Scripture say the hard things to us. If we find an area of our lives where what we say, think, or do doesn't match up with the Bible, it's not the Bible that's wrong.
- The Bible is useful for **CORRECTION**. The word Paul uses there speaks of restoration. The Bible is good for showing us God's original intent for our lives. We all have that nagging feeling that we're not who we're supposed to be. Somewhere along the way, we fell short. We can't even live up to the standards we create for ourselves! How much further have we fallen from God's standards? And yet, Scripture reminds us that we are not stuck in that place. God's Word helps restore us back to God's design.
- The Bible is useful for **TRAINING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS**. We want to do what's right. The Bible shows us how to do that. It speaks to what is right, just, and fair in our homes, in our workplaces, and in our communities. But the Bible doesn't just show us what's right; it introduces us to the One who is Righteous. Scripture teaches us how to live like God and helps us to look more and more like Jesus. We're not learning rules and regulations. We're learning how to live in a relationship with Him.
- The Bible is useful for **EQUIPPING US FOR EVERY GOOD WORK**. It doesn't just tell us what not to do. It prescribes a way of life that proactively seeks the good of others. Though it's primarily concerned with telling us about the spiritual world, the Bible has so much to say about how we live in our everyday world. It speaks of the way we treat our neighbors, the ways we conduct business, and the way we value the image of God in everyone. In everything, the Bible shapes us towards a way of life that is genuinely and beautifully good!

NOW: What Does It Look Like For Us?

Eugene Peterson: *"Reading Scripture constitutes an act of crisis. Day after day, week after week, it brings us into a world that is totally at odds with the species of world that newspaper and television serve up to us on a platter as our daily ration of data for conversation and concern. It is a world where God is active everywhere and always... where God cannot be procrastinated, where everything is relative to God and God is not relative to anything. Reading Scripture involves a dizzying reorientation of our culture-conditioned and job-oriented assumptions and procedures... Everything in the world of culture can be made sense of without God; nothing in the world of Scripture can be made sense of without God."*

Since we know how the Bible intends to change us, how should we read it? If the goal is more about transformation than information, then what should we be looking for as we walk through the pages of Scripture?

Truth be told, there are any number of strategies and reading plans we might use as our guide. We live in a day of unparalleled access to books, podcasts, and other resources that can help us grow in the discipline and practice of Bible reading. Rather than focusing on particular habits,

perhaps it's best to talk about our hearts. When we read the Bible, how should we engage with it on an emotional and mental level? Let's talk about three qualities we can keep in mind as we spend time in the Word – whether in personal study or corporate worship!

QUALITY ONE: GRATEFULNESS

Psalm 126:3: **“Yes, the Lord has done great things for us! What joy!”**

Reading the Bible ought to inspire a fresh sense of thanksgiving and gratitude in our hearts. When we look to the past, we are reminded of what God has done for us. He has moved and worked through history to bring us back to Himself. No matter the story we're reading, we can catch a glimpse of God's work on our behalf. He provides for us, just as He provided for the Israelites in the desert. He supplies the victory, just as He did for David in the Valley of Elah. Most importantly, He saves us through the death, burial and resurrection of His Son. These are historical stories, yes, but their impact doesn't stay in the past. They are the stories of a God who still moves to save and deliver His people in our day.

QUALITY TWO: GODLINESS

1 Timothy 4:7b: **“...Train yourself to be godly.”**

Because these stories of the past bleed into the present, we ought to think about their present ramifications in our lives. If there is a God – and if He really is like the God described in the Bible – then what kind of lives should we live? If this is how He worked in days gone by, what should we do on this day? When we read the Bible through this lens, we realize that it is speaking to our present day. It tells us how to live holy lives. It contains wisdom to help us make godly decisions. It speaks not only to the actions of our hands, but the motivations of our hearts. The ancient stories have incredibly modern applications. In the Scriptures, we see how God wants to move in our lives and relationships today.

QUALITY THREE: GLADNESS

Romans 5:2b: **“...We confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.”**

The Bible tells us about the past and speaks into the present. It also reassures us about the future. Though so much seems beyond our control, Scripture reminds us that there is a God who guides it all. He is going to make all things right. He is going to make good on every promise He has ever made. He will one day satisfy all of our longings and make us whole and complete in Him. Scripture again and again reminds us that this is our future. We can have joy! We can have hope! The anxiety we feel on this day is nothing compared to the assurance we have on that day! As such, our hearts can be filled with gladness. We know where the story is going. We know what God is going to do. When the world seems shaky, the Word is solid, reminding us that everything is going to turn out alright in the end.

WEEK ONE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you in the video teaching? How have you typically thought about (or practiced) Bible study? Is there anything in this week's content that made you reevaluate how you approach this spiritual discipline?
2. Read Acts 2:42-47. What were these four practices the early church devoted themselves to? How did putting their strength towards these things lead them towards strength? What is it about these four practices that helps us grow so much in our spiritual lives? How have you seen this in your own life?
3. Why is it so important for the church to be a community built upon the Word of God? Put yourself in the shoes of those first Christians. What must it have been like to hear the stories of Jesus told by those who walked with Him? How can those stories inspire that same kind of wonder in us today?
4. Read Hebrews 4:12 and 2 Timothy 3:16. What do these two passages teach us about the nature and purposes of God's Word? How have you experienced Scripture working in your heart in these same ways? How has the Bible shaped and changed your life?
5. We talked about three qualities we should look for when studying the Bible: Gratefulness, Godliness, and Gladness. Which of these is the easiest for you to see when studying? Which is the most challenging? How should reading the Bible help us grow in appreciation for what He's done and expectation for what He's going to do?
6. On a practical level, what have been some practices/habits that have helped you study God's Word more effectively? How might these practices help others in your Group? Close your time together in prayer by asking God to help make us better students of His Word – both individually and corporately.

WEEK TWO: Fellowship

Acts 2:42: **“They devoted themselves to...fellowship...”**

Jared Wilson: *“The gospel is a family meal. It is meant to be enjoyed regularly and intentionally in the presence of others and for the benefit of others.”*

Everybody wants a place where they fit in. They want somewhere they feel comfortable – a place where everybody knows their name. No matter our age, gender, or tax bracket, we want to feel like we have somewhere to go, somewhere we belong. In the days before steeples and sanctuaries, the church offered more than a place to go. It was a people to belong to. The first Christians understood that their baptism didn’t just mean unity with Christ, but unity with one another. Their shared faith wove their lives together. When one rejoiced, they all rejoiced. When one suffered, they all suffered. They opened up their homes, shared their possessions, and offered their hearts. They were bound together not by walls – but by their love. The way they practiced belonging gives us a glimpse at the kind of community we’ve all been longing for.

THEN: How Did They Practice It?

The word ‘fellowship’ is a patently Christian word. Even today, you don’t hear it mentioned too often outside of the church. Sure, we may gather together at restaurants, bars, stadiums, and theaters, but we rarely refer to those get-togethers as ‘fellowship.’ Even in the Bible, the word ‘fellowship’ wasn’t found that often until the New Testament. Used only once in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Lev. 6:2), the word spoke of the common responsibilities we have to our neighbors. Being part of a community means that we treat another a certain way – that we have expectations of what it means to live together. Likewise, the Greek word for fellowship (‘koinonia’) was used to denote the commonalities between a group of people – such as their shared language and shared culture. Living in community requires us a common vision of what that life should look like.

From the very beginning, the church in Acts showed their commitment to doing life together. They understood that their shared faith should lead to shared lives. Two early passages in Acts speak of the depth of fellowship the church shared with one another:

Acts 2:44-45: **“And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and share the money with those in need.”**

Acts 4:32: **“All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had.”**

For the first Christians, fellowship wasn’t about hanging out or having a potluck meal. It was about sharing their lives – and their stuff! – with one another. They made it a point to help other believers who were in need. They prioritized spending time with one another. Acts 2:46 tells us that they made it a point to gather together in the Temple every single day. More than

that, when they couldn't make it to God's house, they met in each other's homes to deepen their community even further. They didn't see church as a once-a-week appointment, but as an essential part of their everyday rhythms.

Today, we tend to view church through a consumeristic lens. What does this church have that other ones don't? How can this congregation help me grow in my faith? That sort of calculus seems to be missing from the first church. These believers didn't think of fellowship in terms of what they could gain, but rather what they could give. It wasn't about what the church could do for them, but what they could do for the church. If we want to recapture that kind of devotion, we have to stop thinking about what we need to receive and instead focus on what we have to share.

Breaking Down Barriers

*The book of Acts makes it a point to show us how the message of Jesus brought people of various backgrounds, races, and ethnicities together in the Kingdom. The description of the events of Pentecost (Acts 2) begins with a diverse crowd gathered to celebrate the festival in Jerusalem. Acts 2:9-11 tells us that the people who heard Peter's inaugural sermon hailed included **"Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs."** Yet, mere verses later we're told these very same people **"had everything in common"** (Acts 2:44). Though initially divided by culture, they were united by Jesus! What they found together in Christ was far stronger than any culture or country that might have divided them.*

*This doesn't mean unity was easy. Indeed, very center of Acts tells us about the greatest challenge to unity the early church faced. As more and more Gentiles came to believe in Jesus, the church wrestled with how to incorporate them into their largely Jewish fellowship. How could Jews and Gentiles – people separated by centuries of tradition – ever find common ground? The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 recognized that God **"made no distinction"** (15:9) between people based on race, choosing to save everyone by faith. Once again, the church reaffirmed that manmade barriers are no match for the Gospel.*

ALWAYS: What Does the Bible Say About It?

The New Testament has a lot to say about fellowship. Indeed, most of its ethical teachings seem directed towards community life. There are over 50 "one another" commands scattered across the New Testament letters, each reminding us of our responsibility to love and care for other believers. Even a small sampling of these verses reveals the depth of connection and compassion that defines Christian fellowship:

1 Peter 3:8: “Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.”

Hebrews 10:24-25: “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”

Galatians 5:13: “For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.”

James 5:16: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed...”

Think about the kind of relationships described in these passages. What would it be like to live in a fellowship like this? Imagine a community full of people who are like-minded and love-focused, a community where we accept one another in humility and understanding. Picture yourself among a group of believers who can encourage and challenge each other to live in faithfulness and devotion until the day of Christ’s return. Now, what if that same community was a place where you were free to be yourself – where you could confess your sins and know that other people were praying for you? Isn’t that the kind of community you’d want to be a part of? Isn’t that the kind of fellowship we’d all like to join?

Here's the truth: A community like that just doesn’t appear. It begins with you. Fellowship doesn’t happen accidentally; it grows intentionally. We can’t just expect to walk into a church and find the kind of community we’re looking for. Real community is cultivated – over time, with effort, and with a willingness to invest ourselves. If we’re waiting to find the “perfect church,” we’re going to be waiting until Jesus comes back. We have to take initiative for ourselves. We have to take that first step towards other believers. Create the kind of community you want to be a part of. Be the type of believer who invites others to walk alongside you. Having a humble community begins with your own humility. Living in loving fellowship starts with your own heart. The kind of Christ-centered relationships we long for begin when we choose to walk toward others and not away from them.

NOW: What Does It Look Like For Us?

Paul Gutacker: *Community is always a gift. But it's a gift that challenges us. It's a gift that gives life, and heals; it's a gift that wounds, that can be painful.*

In our day, fellowship is an overlooked and underrated spiritual discipline. When we think of practices that help us grow in our faith, we often think of more solitary pursuits that help us personally connect with Jesus. While those practices are important, so much about our spiritual

life is fostered and formed by the community of faith. The presence and participation of other believers in our lives is part of how the Spirit helps us grow. Sometimes, He helps us grow through their encouragement and support. Other times, He uses the disappointments and disagreements of community life to help us grow in qualities like patience and gentleness. We can't be who we are meant to be in Christ without other Christians.

As you consider what fellowship might look like in your own life, here are four words that can help guide you into deeper, more intentional community:

FRIENDSHIP

- **Romans 12:10 (CSB): "Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters..."**

Somewhere along the line, we convinced ourselves that loving your fellow believers doesn't require you to like them. Can you imagine making that distinction in any other relationship? Suppose you told your spouse (or children) that you love them but don't like them on a personal level. How do you think that conversation would go? (Hint: not well). You can't have genuine affection for another person if there's no real connection there.

Relationships in the Body of Christ require us to actually like other believers. For that reason, we ought to prioritize building friendship and camaraderie within the church. How often do you spend time with other Christians? What hobbies or interests do you share with those you worship beside every week? An activity doesn't have to be overtly spiritual for it to have a spiritual impact. Sometimes we can encourage each other simply by being in the same room. Don't just say you love other believers; show it by spending time in real relationship with them.

HOSPITALITY

- **Hebrews 13:2: "Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!"**

Hospitality is a lost virtue in our culture. Modern houses with attached garages and privacy fences don't exactly scream an invitation to the outside world. Having impromptu visitors at your house seems like a product of a bygone era. Yet, our houses might just be the greatest tool we have for spiritual growth. When we invite people into our homes, we are inviting them into a living, breathing performance of the Gospel. The relationship between a husband and wife is supposed to be a picture of how Jesus loves the church (Eph. 5:32). The way we treat our children speak to how God has adopted us as His own children (Gal. 4:4-5). More importantly, our posture in welcoming guests can paint a vivid picture of Jesus' own hospitality (Rom. 15:7).

Hospitality isn't about having a perfect family. Neither is it about showing off an immaculate home. Hospitality means anticipating needs, sharing what we have, and making space for people in the ordinary rhythms of daily life. It's not about inviting people into our homes; it's about inviting them into our hearts.

OPENNESS

- Galatians 6:2: **“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”**

When one part of your body suffers, your entire body feels it. Afflictions as inconsequential as a stubbed toe or a nagging hangnail can ruin your entire mood. Your body is an intricate web of interconnected systems, each of which needs the others to function so that it can do its own job. The same is true of the church as the Body of Christ! We need each other. When one part suffers, the others suffer with it. When one part can’t do its job, the others feel that stress and react to it. And when one part is wounded, the others can compensate for it – providing care and support so that healing can take place. As a Body, we ought to be connected enough to know what the other parts are going through and close enough to respond in an appropriate way.

Having that kind of relationship requires a high degree of openness. We can’t know if another part of the Body is suffering if that part doesn’t communicate. The Body can’t respond to pain if it doesn’t know that something is wrong. Other believers can’t meet your needs if you keep them at arm’s length. Though our natural inclination is to build up walls to hide our faults and failings, constructing those barriers only keeps us from getting the help we need. Healing begins with honesty. In order to find strength, we must first admit where we are weak.

FORGIVENESS

- Colossians 3:13: **“Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”**

Doing life together can be tough. True community has a way of testing and stretching us – sometimes far beyond what we’re comfortable with. Community can never be perfect because people are not perfect. We each carry around our own hurt and hangups. We all have our soft spots and our sharp edges. The closer we live in community with one another, the more opportunity we have to hurt one another. When those times come, we face a choice. Will we run away from community, deciding that fellowship isn’t worth the pain? Or, will we stay and try to repair what’s been broken?

Once again, the imagery of the church as a Body proves helpful here. When a part of your body is broken, you don’t immediately cut it off. Though there are deep wounds that can require excising, many injuries can be repaired. The proper medicine, not to mention the proper care, can go a long way in helping the healing process. What’s true of broken bones can be true for broken fellowship. A good remedy – and a Great Physician! – can make recovery possible. Forgiveness might not always happen, but a community can grow back stronger when relationships are repaired. True fellowship isn’t the absence of conflict – it’s the commitment to keep walking together through it.

WEEK TWO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you in the video teaching? How have you typically thought about (or practiced) Fellowship? Is there anything in this week's content that made you reevaluate how you approach this spiritual discipline?
2. Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35. What stands out to you as you read about the relationships within the early church? Which parts of this community do you find attractive? Which parts would scare you? What keeps us from this level of fellowship and belonging in today's church?
3. What are some words you would use to describe your idea of Christian fellowship? What would your ideal faith community look like? Compare your answers with your group members. Where do you agree? Where do you diverge? How can our different expectations for community create challenges?
4. We talked about four words to describe fellowship (Friendship, Openness, Hospitality, and Forgiveness). Which comes the easiest for you? Which is the most difficult? Why? As you think about the best communities you've ever been a part of, what are some other words you might add to that list?
5. Read Hebrews 10:24-25. What expectations does the writer of Hebrews give for the community of believers? How should we, as believers, both challenge and encourage one another? How does the reality of Christ's return change the ways we do this for one another?
6. Why do we downplay the importance of fellowship? Why is fellowship worth devoting ourselves to? What have been some practices/habits that have helped you prioritize fellowship? Close your time together in prayer by asking God to you and your Group grow more closely into a kind of community that resembles the early church.

WEEK THREE: The Breaking of Bread

Acts 2:42: **“They devoted themselves to... the breaking of bread...”**

Paul Gutacker: *“When we wake up on a Sunday morning, get out the door, and find our way to our seat, we’re not just ticking the “religious” box on our weekly to-do list. We’re not gathering to optimize our best life now, or to be slightly more decent to each other. ...We gather on Sunday mornings to become who we are. We were made for worship, to share in the delight and joy of God’s love. This is what’s most true about us—it’s our purpose, our destiny. In short, we go to church because we are called.”*

What is worship? Your answer to that question often depends on the faith tradition you grew up with. Some see worship as a somber affair. They practice a set liturgy with formality and reverence. Others view worship as a more spontaneous affair. They don’t need order, just opportunity. Truth be told, there are countless ways we can express our praise to God. The fact that we can worship in a seemingly infinite number of ways reminds us that we worship an infinitely innumerable God. The diversity of our worship also reminds us of our unity in Christ. As we lift our individual voices up in song, we remember that Jesus’ church has joined people from all across the world (and from all across time!) to praise God with one unified voice. Therefore, the ways we worship – from the songs we sing to the sacraments we share – call us closer to God and to one another. Our shared worship reminds us of our shared Savior and our shared hope, that we will one day share an eternity together in His presence.

THEN: How Did They Practice It?

To our modern ears, the “breaking of bread” doesn’t sound too dissimilar from fellowship. When we talk about breaking bread together, we’re talking about sharing lives over a shared meal. And while that was part of the equation for the early church, it doesn’t tell the whole story. The first Christians didn’t have church buildings. They hadn’t constructed fellowship halls yet. They could occasionally meet together in the Temple, but even that became a hostile space after a while. So, if they wanted to gather for worship, they had to gather in each other’s homes. Their first church buildings didn’t consist of steeples or sanctuaries, but of living rooms and dining tables. They met together and “broke bread” as part of their worship services. Luke points us towards this reality in the final verses of Acts 2:

Acts 2:46-47: **“They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity – all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of the people.”**

For these believers, the line between worship and fellowship was beautifully blurred. They would meet in someone’s home, eat a meal together, sing songs of worship, and talk about the stories of Jesus. After sharing their time and sharing a meal, they would pass around the bread and the cup to celebrate communion together. This grassroots liturgy defined the practice of the church as it spread from Jerusalem into the larger Roman Empire. Indeed, Paul’s later

writings to the Corinthian church (see below) show that these “agape feasts” became part of the church’s identity no matter where it went.

Just like the practice of fellowship, the “breaking of bread” reminds us that Christianity is not a solo endeavor. Jesus may call us individually, but He invites us to be a part of something He’s building – a church that stretches across nations and cultures, even across time itself! When we gather to corporately worship, we are joining in the practices and praises of the church throughout the centuries. More importantly, we are joining in the songs of the eternal, glorified church and the believers who have gone before us! Every time we “break bread” together, we break through time itself to sing praise with those gathered at the throne of God: **“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered – to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing”** (Rev. 5:12).

Biblical Words for Worship

When the early church joined together for worship, they were building on an incredible foundation. The Old Testament overflows with examples of what it looks like to join together in times of corporate praise and celebration. In fact, the book of Psalms alone gave them 150 chapters of songs, prayers, and canticles to lead them through their worship of God. One scholar has estimated that there are at least 45 different Hebrew words that are used to describe what worship should look like. A couple of the more notable ones include:

- *Halal – This word (from which we derive the English “Hallelujah”) carries the idea of “shouting in triumph” or “boasting” in the Lord. It speaks of the kind of joyful expression we should have when we consider all God has done for us.*
- *Shabah – Usually translated as ‘laud,’ this word was also used for eulogizing someone. We honor the dead by making a list of their accomplishments. How much more do we have to celebrate when we consider the works of the Living God?*
- *Zamar – Today’s worship songs are filled with instruments from across the world. This word, meaning “to pluck the strings of an instrument,” reminds us that instrumentation has always been an acceptable part of our praise.*
- *Barak – One of the most common Old Testament words for worship, barak carries the idea of blessing someone or something. In blessing God, we proclaim that He alone is worthy of all the goodness and glory our feeble hearts can muster.*

We sometimes struggle to define ‘worship.’ Perhaps some of that difficulty is inherent in the word. The concept of worship is so deep – and its implications so wide – that no one word can really capture it all. The Old Testament believers and the early Christians both understood that worship is so vast that even a lifetime of devotion cannot exhaust it, and so glorious that eternity itself will not extinguish our songs.

ALWAYS: What Does the Bible Say About It?

Several New Testament books offer us insight into the ways the early church worshipped together. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote to a church that was struggling to get its act together. One of the ways their dysfunction revealed itself was through their weekly worship gatherings. Paul's instructions to this fledgling church give us a window into what he expected their worship to look like:

1 Corinthians 11:17-21: "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk."

1 Corinthians 14:26, 33: "What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up... For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people."

It's clear that Paul had some solid expectations for what the church would do when they gathered together to break bread. For starters, he expected it to be a time of unity and order. Though the church was comprised of members from different cultures and backgrounds, Paul called them to worship as one body. The differences between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor would melt away as these believers shared with one another. In everything they did together – whether it was eating, worshipping, or studying Scripture – the members of the church needed to let go of their divisions and practice unity. Lifting their voice in one song together was a powerful display of how God had taken their separate lives and made them one.

Secondly, Paul expected that their worship would have some form of liturgy to it. While He didn't prescribe an exact order of service, he did encourage them to do things in an orderly fashion. Their times of worship weren't supposed to be a "free-for-all" with each believer loudly doing their own thing. A chaotic worship service like that would betray the well-ordered character of a God who set the planets in their orbit. It would also keep them from encouraging and challenging one another. Paul wanted them to worship God in a way that would exalt Him and edify one another.

Indeed, some of Paul's other letters remind us that the point of the worship service isn't just to sing together; it's to share the Gospel with one another:

Ephesians 5:18-19 (ESV): "...Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart."

Colossians 3:16 (ESV): “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Though we primarily worship to praise God, there’s a secondary benefit to us. Whether we’re singing, listening to Scripture, praying, or sharing in communion, we are also acting out the truths of the Gospel for one another. We’re reminding each other of what’s really real and what really matters. Our singing strengthens those around us, assuring them that they do not proclaim these truths alone. Hearing the Word together roots us in a shared commitment to live out what we hear. Praying with and for one another reminds us that we have a community who carries our needs before God. And sharing the bread and the cup reminds us that our life together is made possible only through the sacrifice of Jesus. True worship is for God and it forms us.

NOW: What Does It Look Like For Us?

Ryanne J. Molinari: “What we do in worship must glorify God and edify his church. But what we get out of our worship – what result or product we hope to yield — must be the increase of spiritual fruit in our lives and the lives of those worshipping with us.”

So much of our contemporary discussions about worship center on the style. Should we sing hymns? Contemporary songs? Something else? Yet, what we see in Scripture is that worship isn’t about the style so much as it is about the spirit. The attitude and posture we bring into the worship goes a long way in determining if our worship is acceptable to God. We can sing in perfect harmony and still miss the mark if our hearts aren’t in the right place. What does it mean to worship God in our day? As we gather to “break bread,” how should we prepare our hearts? Here are a few suggestions for what our times of corporate worship should accomplish among us and within us:

DIVERSITY

1 Corinthians 12:12: “The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ.”

Our times of corporate worship remind us of the great diversity within the Body of Christ. As we gather, we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with people whose stories differ from our own—people of different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. We hear different voices, each with its own unique pitch and cadence. The harmonies inherent in our music serve as a vivid tonal reminder of how diverse we are as a church. Just as we sing different parts, Christ has given us different roles to play in His Body. As our voices blend together in one unified song of praise, we celebrate how God has taken our separate lives and weaved them into a church that’s far more beautiful than any of us could be on our own.

UNITY

Matthew 5:23-24: “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.”

It’s hard to lift our voices if we’re at each other’s throats. Our divisions and disagreements create a dissonance in our lives that makes worship difficult, if not impossible. Coming into worship with unresolved conflict or bitter grudges not only fractures the Body – it fragments our own hearts. We can’t focus on God if we’re angry at our brother. We can’t fully give God our hearts if they’re filled with contempt for our sisters. Before we can break bread together, we must first do the hard work of restoring the broken relationships in our midst.

LEGACY

Acts 20:7: “On the first day of the week, we gathered with the local believers to share in the Lord’s Supper.”

Our weekly gatherings aren’t just a show of unity with our own congregation. They show our solidarity with the Church across the world. As we gather to worship together, countless believers in diverse cultures and contexts are lifting their voices to the same Lord. Our services may look different, but they bear witness to the same realities. More than that, our weekly gatherings root us in the practices of the early church. From the first house churches to the majestic cathedrals to our modern-day auditoriums, Christians throughout time have made worship a priority. When we raise our voices together, we participate in the life and liturgy of the church everlasting.

MATURITY

Romans 12:1-2: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Our lives are shaped by the things we worship. The more we focus our attention and adoration on something (or someone) the more we resemble the object of our affection. We become what we behold. Paul reminds us in Romans 12 that worship is one of the ways we become more and more like God. It’s in our worship that God renews our minds, reorders our desires, and reshapes our character. The closer we move towards Him, the easier it becomes for us to recognize His will and His ways. If we long to know God more deeply, the path begins not with striving, but with worship – turning our hearts toward Him again and again until His presence becomes the defining influence of our lives.

WEEK THREE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you in the video teaching? How have you typically thought about (or practiced) the “breaking of bread”? Is there anything in this week’s content that made you reevaluate how you approach this spiritual discipline?
2. Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 20:7-12. How did the early church prioritize meeting and worshipping together? How does their emphasis on community life and worship compare to ours? What would their practice of worshipping around a shared community meal look like in our culture?
3. When you think of the word ‘worship,’ what comes to mind? Do you think of a more traditional, liturgical service or something that’s a bit more contemporary and casual? If someone asked you to define worship, what would you say it is? How does gathering together for worship remind us that worship is greater than our own preferences?
4. Worship is for God, but it forms us. How have you seen this truth in your own life? Why do we become like the things we worship? Why do the things we adore end up setting the direction for our lives? In what ways has God used your times of worship to help make you more like Christ?
5. Read Colossians 3:12-17 and Ephesians 5:15-20. What do these passages tell us about how our worship influences and encourages the believers around us? How do the elements of a worship service help us to connect with and inspire the believers around us? In what ways does community grow through our shared worship?
6. On a practical level, what have been some practices/habits that have helped you in your own individual and corporate rhythms of worship? How might these practices help others in your Group? Close your time together in prayer by asking God to bring us to greater unity and devotion in how we “break bread” and worship together.

WEEK FOUR: Prayer

Acts 2:42: **“They devoted themselves to...prayer.”**

Tim Keller: *“Prayer is so great that wherever you look in the Bible, it is there. Why? Everywhere God is, prayer is. Since God is everywhere and infinitely great, prayer must be all-pervasive in our lives.”*

On the surface, prayer looks like inaction. Quietly meditating on your problems and talking to God about the issues we face would seem to be a poor substitute for rolling up your sleeves and doing something. The New Testament takes a slightly different view on what prayer can accomplish. From a heavenly standpoint, prayer is one of the most effective things we can do. After all, our prayers are directed towards the God of the Universe. When we pray, we engage with the most powerful Being in all creation. There’s nothing He can’t do! There’s no problem He can’t solve! Prayer invites us to bring all our temporary troubles and trials to the feet of the eternal God. It strengthens us because it connects us to the source of all strength. And yet, prayer isn’t just about the things we need; it’s about the God we need. Prayer isn’t inaction – it is intimacy. That’s because our ultimate goal in prayer isn’t to see Him work, but to see Him.

THEN: How Did They Practice It?

The fact that Luke lists prayer as the last of the four disciplines betrays its importance in Acts. Indeed, of the four practices we’ve talked about in this study, prayer is mentioned far more regularly than any of the others (see below). The first Christians understood the significance of prayer and what it accomplishes both in the life of the church and in the lives of individual believers. They knew that prayer was powerful because the God they prayed to was powerful.

The power of prayer is on full display in the longest recorded prayer in Acts. After the Sanhedrin arrested Peter and John for preaching, the apostles were released with strict instructions not to proclaim Christ. Rather than following their command, they gathered with the church to pray for the boldness to defy this order. When the church prayed, God showed up:

Acts 4:24-30: **“When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God: ‘O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them – you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying, ‘Why were the nations so angry? Why did they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the LORD and against his Messiah.’ ...And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’ After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.”**

We think of prayer as a solitary, peaceful activity. Can you imagine a prayer service that triggers an earthquake? Yet, that's exactly what these first Christians experienced. When they prayed, they saw God show up in incredible ways. They watched as the Holy Spirit was poured out in their midst. They saw God do incredible miracles and provide unimaginable deliverance. They marveled at how the Lord added to their growing fellowship each and everyday (Acts 2:47). Prayer wasn't passive. It wasn't always quiet. When they cried their prayers into heaven, they expected that heaven would answer in a mighty way.

Notice how their practice of prayer touched on the other practices mentioned in Acts 2:42. Their prayers happened in fellowship with one another. They didn't go to their own homes to pray. They prayed for boldness as a gathered Body of believers. They also prayed using the Scriptures. In asking for boldness, they incorporated the opening verses of Psalm 2. They took God's Word and used it to ask for God's power. Once again, we are reminded that these early spiritual disciplines didn't exist in a vacuum. They were as intertwined as the lives of the believers who practiced them. It wasn't just about the spiritual activity; it was about forming their identity as a new community centered on Jesus Christ.

Prayer in the Book of Acts

Prayer is at the forefront of the ministry and practices of the early church. As detailed throughout the book of Acts – where prayer and its related words appear over 30 times! – the church made prayer one of its utmost priorities. Their prayers were wide-ranging, including prayers for such necessities as:

- **WISDOM** → *Whenever the church needed guidance or direction, they turned to God in prayer. Remember, most of the first apostles were untrained fishermen and laborers. They weren't seminary trained. They had never led a global movement before! So, they sought out God so that He could show them what to do. In Acts 1:24, they asked God to show them who should replace Judas Iscariot as a member of the Twelve. Acts 6:4 says they prayed the same sort of prayer when appointing the first deacons. They sought God's will rather than just going their own way.*
- **MISSION** → *In His final words to the apostles, Jesus commissioned them to be His witnesses in "**Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**" (1:8). As they lived out this calling, prayer was their compass. The church in Antioch prayed for and commissioned Paul and Barnabas before sending them out on a missionary journey (13:3). On another trip, Paul received a miraculous vision telling him to take the Gospel to Macedonia (16:9). And before Paul went to Rome to testify before Caesar, the elders in Ephesus prayed over him (21:5).*
- **SALVATION** → *The first believers didn't just pray for the mission in broad strokes. They prayed for the people they encountered on the way. Acts 8:22 tells us that Peter prayed for a Samaritan believer known as "Simon the Sorcerer" to repent of his evil and turn back to God. In Acts 26:29, Paul prayed that his gathered audience – including Herod Agrippa II – would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus. As they watched the Gospel change the world, they still prayed for it to change individual hearts.*

- ***MIRACLES** → With all they had seen God accomplish through their prayers, the first Christians weren't afraid to ask for even more incredible things. Acts records several prayers they made for miraculous interventions. Peter prayed for the young Tabitha to be resurrected (9:40). The whole church, in turn, would later pray for Peter when he was imprisoned in Jerusalem (12:5). When Paul and Silas prayed in their own prison cell (Acts 16:25), God shook the foundations of the jail and broke their chains. When the church prayed with expectation, God moved in ways that defied explanation.*

ALWAYS: What Does the Bible Say About It?

Like the book of Acts, the New Testament places a premium on prayer. Countless passages speak to the centrality of prayer in the life of believers, calling us to focus on prayer in both our individual and corporate lives. Prayer is part of what it means to be a Christian and part of what it means to be the church. Notable passages on prayer include:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-17: **“Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.”**

Jude 1:20-21: **“But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God’s love.”**

Ephesians 6:18-19: **“Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere. And pray for me, too. Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God’s mysterious plan that the Good News is for Jews and Gentiles alike.”**

The New Testament call to prayer isn't a command to recite a particular incantation. Nor is it a directive to pray at certain times of day. It's far greater than that. Believers are called to make prayer their very way of life. Paul commands us to pray “at all times and on every occasion” and to “never stop praying.” Jude tells us that prayer is part of what it means to live in God's love. God's people are supposed to pray about anything and everything that's going on in their lives. That's because we believe that something happens we pray. We invite God into our day-to-day life. We engage Him in the rhythms of our days. That's because God doesn't just answer prayers; He answers us.

The prayers we see in the New Testament offer us even more of a glimpse at how the early church prayed. Both the “Lord's Prayer” in Matthew 6 and Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesians 5 have helped guide the prayer lives of Christians throughout the ages:

Matthew 6:9-13: **“Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today**

the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one."

Ephesians 1:18-21: "I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called – his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance. I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else – not only in this world but also in the world to come."

Jesus' model prayer reminds us of how prayer can shape our lives. When we pray, we look first and foremost to who God is. We ask for His name and His glory to be evident on the earth. We pray for His Kingdom for come and for His will to saturate every corner of our world and every crevice of our hearts. We pray for His forgiveness, His provision, and His protection. Prayer is not just about asking for God to grant us these things. It's about putting ourselves in a posture of dependence on Him, recognizing that only He can provide what we truly need.

Paul's prayer reminds us of how prayer can strengthen our hearts. There are times when we feel mired in darkness. We don't know the way to go, let alone the way out of the mess we've made. In those situations, prayer serves as our light. It illuminates the ways God is at work in our stories. It connects us to the power at our disposal through the Spirit who indwells us. It offers us strength for the road ahead, reminding us of the brilliant hope no darkness can take away from us. No matter the season of life, we can turn to prayer as our guide. It's in God's presence that we receive the clarity, courage, and peace we need to face the present moment.

NOW: What Does It Look Like For Us?

Tim Stafford: "Here, I believe, is the key to understanding what is most personal in prayer. We do not pray to tell God what He does not know, nor to remind Him of things He has forgotten. He already cares for the things we pray about... He has simply been waiting for us to care about them with Him. When we pray, we stand by God and look with Him toward those people and problems... We speak to him as we speak to our most intimate friends – so that we can commune together in love."

Every relationship is built on communication. You can't really know someone if you never talk to them. Think about the daily ways you communicate with the people you love. You give them a quick phone call. You send them a text. You leave them a note on the fridge. We know how important it is to stay in touch with someone if you want to have a relationship with them. At its simplest level, that's exactly what prayer is! Though we tend to overthink and hyper-analyze our words in prayer, it is no different than any other form of communication. It is

talking. It is asking. It is thanking. We talk to God the same way we would talk to our friends – by sharing openly and freely about the things going on in our lives.

And yet, to say that prayer is just like any other communication is to sell it woefully short. Prayer isn't just sharing with our friend; it is sharing with our Father! When we pray, we are talking to – and hearing from – the God of the Universe! There's no other communication that comes close to that! There's no one higher we could talk to! If we could recognize prayer for the wonder that it is, we would never stop!

With that in mind, how should we pray? Even Jesus' disciples struggled to know the exact things we should talk to God about (Luke 11:1). So, how should we communicate with God? The late Timothy Keller once suggested that our prayers should be aimed in three directions:

UPWARD

Romans 11:36: "For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen."

Our prayers first and foremost should recognize God's greatness. We should adore Him for who He is. We should praise Him for what He's done. It's tempting to rush into prayer with our shopping list of the things we want. But before we say a word, we should stop and consider that the thing we need more than anything else is more of Him!

INWARD

Psalms 139:23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life."

Prayer should also reflect our desire to know what God wants from us. Where does He want us to go? What are some of the corners of our hearts we've held back from Him? When we pray, we should create space not just to speak to God, but to allow Him to speak to us. That way, even if our prayers don't change our circumstances, they can still change our hearts.

OUTWARD

Ephesians 6:18: "Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere."

While prayer often feels like a solitary endeavor, it ought to push us to think outside of ourselves. The New Testament speaks quite a bit about the importance of intercessory prayer. What are some of the needs we've heard about today? How has God brought us into contact with the hurting and vulnerable? As we pray, we should stop and consider how we can invite heaven to intervene here on earth.

WEEK FOUR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you in the video teaching? How have you typically thought about (or practiced) prayer? Is there anything in this week's content that made you reevaluate how you approach this spiritual discipline?
2. Read Acts 2:42-47 and 4:24-30. Why do you think the early church made prayer such a priority? How did God use their prayers to move and to act in the world? How have you seen the power of prayer in your own life? When was a time when you clearly saw God move through prayer?
3. Based on what we saw this week, what were some of the things the early church prayed about/for? How do we see this emphasis on prayer throughout the Bible? As God's people, why should prayer be so important to us? Why, then, do we struggle to give it the priority it deserves?
4. When you think of prayer, do you often think about it more as a personal discipline or a corporate one? Why? Why is it important for us to pray together as a church? How does that help us grow and mature in our faith? Why is it important for us to pray individually? How does that prompt spiritual growth within us?
5. Are there any prayers that have been meaningful for you (whether in Scripture or from another source)? As you think about the prayers in passages such as Ephesians 1 and Matthew 6, what are some of the things you are prompted to pray for? How can viewing our prayers through that lens of "Upward, Inward, Outward" change how you pray?
6. On a practical level, what have been some practices/habits that have helped you pray more effectively? How might these practices help others in your Group? As you close up this "Towards Strength" study, what's been your biggest takeaway? How might this change the ways you pursue spiritual growth?