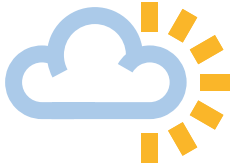




Sunshine  
and  
showers

Prayer's  
beautiful  
messiness



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# Welcome to Sunshine and showers: Prayer's beautiful messiness

Prayer is one of the things we do as followers of Jesus to communicate with God. It is one of the twelve core commitments of ***A Methodist Way of Life***, a way we respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and live out our discipleship in worship and mission.

Prayer is wonderful and frustrating. Not everyone finds it easy. This is the reality of prayer, but sometimes it feels like we must be doing something wrong.

Part of the problem is that prayer is riddled with paradoxes. It doesn't always make sense in a simple way. Different aspects of it can be contradictory and yet true. For example, the Bible makes confident claims that God can heal people. And yet, we regularly pray for people who are unwell, and nothing seems to happen.

This sort of paradox can give us what psychologists call cognitive dissonance: that unpleasant feeling when we believe mutually incompatible things. People naturally want to reduce this discomfort. One way to do this is to oversimplify and ignore one side and push into the other: 'God always heals if we pray,' or, 'there's no point praying for healing.' Another strategy is to avoid praying. Either way, our prayerful connection to God suffers.

This course aims to explore six of these paradoxes. It aims to encourage us to keep praying, and to resist the temptation to jump to one pole of the paradox or the other. Good news can appear when we embrace the mystery and give it space to breathe.

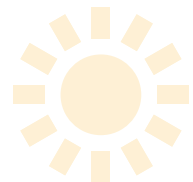


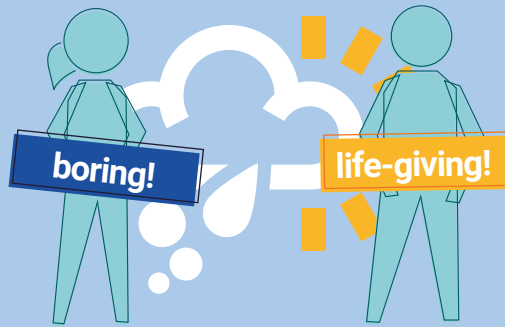
**By the end of the six sessions we hope you will have gained:**

- some fresh ways of thinking about prayer
- reassurance that while prayer is not straightforward, it is always good
- ideas for praying in different and creative ways
- confidence to journey alongside others in their prayer lives, even if it looks different to our own.

Some guidance on facilitating this course is available on page 44, and all additional resources needed to run this course, including all the videos, are available at [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/sunshine). There is also a page for you to write notes, doodles, prayers, questions and encouragements on page 49.

Go deeper: Explore more about the themes in this course and related resources and books at [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/sunshine)





## Session 1: Prayer as friendship

Prayer is boring ◀

▶ Prayer is life-giving

*This is the introductory session. It sets the scene for the course and introduces the idea of prayer as paradox. Each week we look at a particular pair of apparently contradictory ideas, both of which are experienced by people who pray.*

*Throughout this course we will be thinking about prayer as relationship with God. In this first session we look at prayer through the lens of 'friendship'. How is our prayer life affected if we think of it as being part of our friendship with God?*

### Watch animation 'Session 1: Prayer as friendship'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of prayer?

#### Prayer is boring

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### Prayer is life-giving

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

Prayer is friendship with God. Sometimes friendships can have boring moments, and that's fine because they are underpinned by love. But overall, friendship shouldn't be exhausting. It has its ups and downs, but it's a relationship – communication is key.

## Preparation

Think back over your own experiences of prayer so far. What have been the highlights and difficulties you have experienced? What have been the turning points when your ideas about prayer evolved?

## Introductory prayer

*God of the universe, and the microcosm,  
Of the expanse and the particular,  
God of the young and the old, the tall and the short,  
the brave and the frightened, the black and the white,  
and all the in-between ones:  
you are unchanging and yet ever new.  
We try to contain you through our understanding,  
yet you break free, laughing like the leaves in the wind.  
When asked your name you gave a riddle "YHWH".  
We know you above all as the God of love.  
As we meet and  
as we wrestle with what it means to pray,  
may our conversations reflect your love and grace  
that we may grow in you and closer to you  
as we seek to learn more week by week.  
Amen.*

## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation: 'Prayer as friendship'?

- Briefly introduce yourselves and share your main response to the video.
- What do you think to the idea of prayer being a paradox?
- In what ways do you agree or disagree with the description of prayer as friendship?
- What do you love about prayer?
- What do you find most challenging about praying regularly?
- How often does your prayer life feel boring?
- How often does your prayer life feel life-giving?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussions and questions throughout the session.*





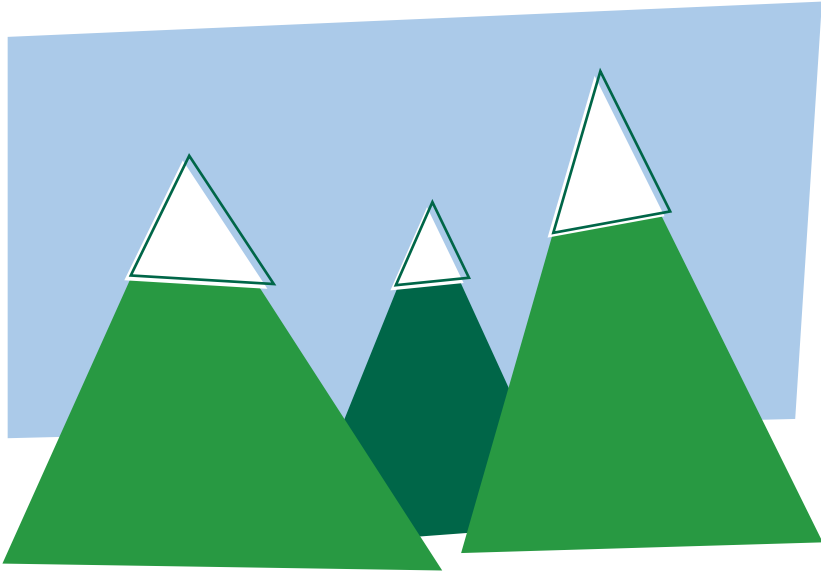
## Watch 'Conversation 1: Prayer as friendship'

### Response

#### Discussion

- Which of the prayer experiences shared in the video do you most relate to?
- Philip Yancey has written extensively about prayer. He said "I believe that life with God should seem more like friendship than duty. Prayer includes moments of ecstasy and also dullness, mindless distraction and acute concentration, flashes of joy and bouts of irritation. In other words, prayer has features in common with all relationships that matter."<sup>1</sup>How does this make you feel?
- Richard Lovelace noted that "One person's piety is another person's poison".<sup>2</sup> Is there a prayer practice someone you know finds sustaining, but that you would find draining?
- Ask different people to read the following Bible passages. What do they tell us about how God understands our relationship with God? **You could print these out and ask people to highlight key words in the passages.**
  - Daniel 2:17-19
  - 2 Corinthians 12:7-9
  - John 15:12-15
- Friendship can be different to different people, and so our relationship with God might be built in different ways too. How would you describe your relationship with God?

## Activity: Mapping highs and lows



- Use the image of a mountain range above. Among the mountaintops, write or draw something that represents times when you have had a rich, life-giving experience of prayer. If you wish to do this activity as a group, draw the mountain range on to a large sheet of paper.
- Alongside the valleys, write or draw something that represents times when you have struggled to pray because of boredom or distraction.
- Compare the two lists. Can you see any patterns?
- Think of one thing you could do next time you have a life-giving experience of prayer to remember it. Think of one thing you could do next time you find prayer boring or mundane to acknowledge this.

### Let us pray

Pray for everyone on the course to develop a growing relationship (friendship) with God. Write their names in the margins as a prompt to continuing prayer for them over the next few weeks. You can also record things you think God might be wanting to bless them with.

## Follow up

### Reflect

What does 'prayer as friendship' mean for you? Reflect on your prayer life over the next week. When is it tedious; when is it life-giving? What's different about those different times?

### Act

If you struggle to accept boredom or distraction when praying, try saying aloud to yourself 'I am struggling to pray right now' and decide how to react. You might want to stop praying and try again at a later time. Or, you could make a list of whatever is distracting you, and leave it to one side while you pray. Alternatively, use a centring phrase such as 'Holy God', 'Thank you God' or simply the name of Jesus to refocus onto God. You could also try singing, writing or drawing your prayer.

### Prepare

In the next session we will think about prayer as rhythm: the paradox that prayer happens at dedicated times and also happens continuously. Which are you more comfortable with – setting aside times to pray, or 'praying as you go'? Which do you find difficult?

### Go deeper

General introductions to, and resources for prayer:

- [24-7prayer.com](http://24-7prayer.com), including books by Pete Grieg and Brian Heasley
- Philip Yancey, *Prayer: does it make any difference?*
- [lindisfarne-scriptorium.co.uk](http://lindisfarne-scriptorium.co.uk)
- Explore creative, intergenerational, silent, group and more prayer resources from the Methodist Church, including the *Methodist Prayer Handbook*: [methodist.org.uk/pray](http://methodist.org.uk/pray)



## Session 2: Prayer as rhythm

Prayer happens at dedicated times ◀

▶ Prayer happens continuously

*We meet some of our friends for frequent brief encounters and some friends we spend occasional quality time with. A few special friends are with us almost all the time. In this session we ask 'what is our rhythm of meeting with God in prayer?'*

### Watch animation 'Session 2: Prayer as rhythm'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of prayer?

#### Prayer happens at dedicated times

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### Prayer happens continuously

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

It's good to set aside time to be with friends, but we can also feel them with us 'in spirit' even when we're far apart. Similarly, it's good to have a rhythm of dedicated prayer times as well as having the capacity to pray every second of the day while we go about our lives.

## Introductory prayer

*God of the regular rhythm of the sun and the moon,*

*God of the seasons and the tides,*

*You are also mysterious.*

*Sometimes we simply cannot fathom your ways.*

*You have created a diverse people  
with different ideas and personalities.*

*I thank you that everyone else is not like me!*

*I am wonderfully and uniquely designed  
to give glory back to you.*

*May I never be too busy to remember  
that you are God,*

*that Jesus is your Son,*

*that your Spirit is with me –  
minute by minute, breath by breath.*

*That is an amazing – and humbling – thought.*

*Thank you, God.*

*Amen.*

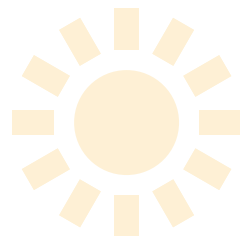


## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation: 'Prayer as rhythm'?

- Is it possible to stop praying?
- What distracts you from praying?
- What tools help you to pray at dedicated times in the day? (For example phone apps, alarms, or 'meetings' in your diary.)
- What helps you to pray in the everyday activities of life? (For example when stopped at traffic lights or when watching the news.)
- How often do you pray at dedicated times?
- Do you find dedicated prayer times or a continuous flow of prayer a more natural part of your rhythm? Why is this?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussions and questions throughout the session.*



## Watch 'Conversation 2: Prayer as rhythm'

### Response

#### Discussion

- Which of the prayer experiences shared in the video do you most relate to?
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-19 (New Revised Standard Version, NRSVA) says "Rejoice always, **pray without ceasing**, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit." For some people this verse is an encouragement to keep praying about one thing; for others it is an encouragement to continuous prayer. What does it mean to you?
- As mentioned in the animation, John Wesley said "All that a Christian does, even in eating and sleeping, is prayer." How could eating or sleeping be prayer?
- Philip Yancey distinguishes between "saying prayers, which is an activity", and "praying, which is a soul attitude, a 'lifting up of the mind to God'". He suggests we can "give God attention even while doing something else: to pray simultaneously as other activities are going on. I simply try to direct Godward the inner dialogue that is taking place all the time."<sup>3</sup> Do you pray while doing other things? Do you find this encouraging or distracting?

#### Activity: Creating a prayer plan

Mark Buchanan says "We crave balance, but need rhythm" (*Spiritual Rhythms*). Create a prayer schedule for the week. Include longer times set aside once a day and shorter bursts throughout the day, focusing on whichever you find harder.

Is there anything you might do together, such as everyone writing prayers in a shared WhatsApp group at the same time every day?

If you have a set of the Methodist Prayer Cards (available at [methodist.org.uk/PrayerCards](http://methodist.org.uk/PrayerCards)), pick a few cards that might help with this activity and share them with the group for discussion.

## Let us pray

We have been thinking of prayer like breathing. Richard Rohr notes that “the Jewish name for God – Yahweh – was not spoken, but breathed. Its correct pronunciation is an attempt to imitate the sound of inhalation and exhalation.”<sup>4</sup> Why not try a breath prayer together. Here we take a simple phrase from scripture to reflect on and use it as we breathe in and out.

For example, breathe in slowly and deeply as you whisper or silently think these words:

**“The Lord is my Shepherd...”**

Hold your breath for a moment as you become conscious of God’s presence.

Then exhale as you whisper or think these words

**“... I shall not want.”**

An alternative might be to breathe in as you say or think

**“The Lord bless you.”**

Hold your breath for a moment, then exhale as you say or think

**“... and keep you.”**

## Follow up

### Reflect

Which do you find harder, setting aside time to pray, or praying continuously? This week, try to do more of whichever you find harder.

### Act

If you did the prayer plan activity during the session, make sure you put it into practice this week. If you didn’t, have a go at creating one now.



## Prepare

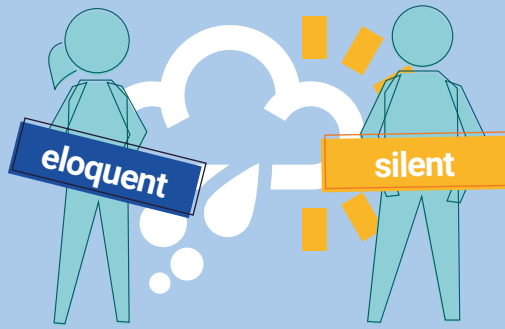
Next week we will consider different forms of prayer: eloquent liturgy, simple words, and silent heart groans. Over this week reflect on how you pray – what do you notice? Do you use words (your own or written by others)? Is silence a part of your prayer? Do you use creative or active methods? Why do you think you use the particular form or forms of prayer that you turn to most regularly?

## Go Deeper

- Richard Foster, *A Celebration of Discipline*
- Danielle Strickland, 'Prayer rhythms to nourish your soul' (video series, available at [worldvision.org/church/resources/PrayerRhythms](https://www.worldvision.org/church/resources/PrayerRhythms))
- Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*

Find more resources online at [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://www.methodist.org.uk/sunshine)





## Session 3: Forms of prayer

Prayer is speaking aloud eloquently ◀

▶ Prayer is silent soul groaning

*Sometimes when we meet with friends we have vibrant and energetic conversations; at other times we may simply 'be' in silence together. In this session we explore how we meet with God in prayer. Is this experience always the same?*

### Watch animation 'Session 3: Forms of prayer'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of prayer?

Prayer is speaking aloud eloquently

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

Prayer is silent soul groaning

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

There are many ways to pray, just as we all have different ways of communicating with our friends. It doesn't need to always be eloquent, but at times it's helpful to use words. Sometimes we use well-crafted words, sometimes we just sit in silence, knowing each other well enough that we don't need to explain what's going on in our hearts and minds. Prayer should aim for intimacy.

## Introductory prayer

*God of words and deafening silence,*

*God in the articulate*

*and in the wordless cry for help,*

*we turn to you.*

*You communicate in a myriad of ways.*

*You hear the cries of our hearts,*

*and the words of our lips.*

*May we be honest, open and willing*

*in all our prayers,*

*and may we listen with the same*

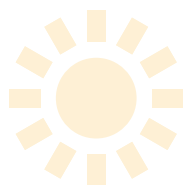
*readiness to hear your voice,*

*feel your comfort, and*

*recognise your call to action.*

*We look to Jesus our pattern and our saviour.*

*Amen.*



## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation: 'Forms of prayer'?

- Do you find verbal or silent prayer comes more naturally?
- When might prayer without words seem more eloquent than a verbal expression? What picture comes to mind as you ponder this question?
- Do you know people who would say "I'm not good at praying" because they don't feel articulate? What might you say to help them?
- Thinking of the forms of prayer you use: how does your experience of communal prayer differ from your experience in personal prayer?
- How often do you pray aloud using eloquent words?
- How often do you pray in silent soul groaning?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussions and questions throughout the session.*

## Watch 'Conversation 3: Forms of prayer'

### Response

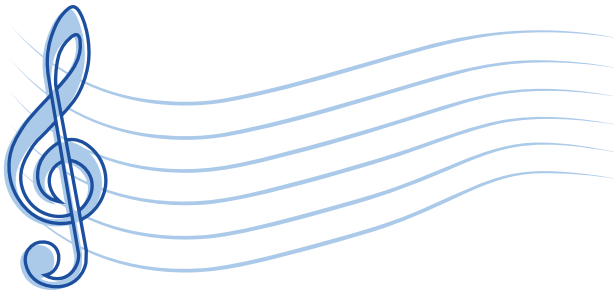
#### Discussion

- Which of the prayer experiences shared in the video do you most relate to?
- John Wesley said "All sorts of prayer – public, private, mental, vocal" were important, so we should "not be diligent in one kind of prayer and negligent in others ... let us use all." Is there a type of prayer that you're neglecting?
- Martin Laid wrote that "Communion with God in the silence of the heart is a God-given capacity, like the Rhododendron's capacity to flower."<sup>5</sup> Does this appeal to you?
- Read Psalm 8. Although the Psalms are often very personal prayers, we know that they were read aloud and prayed as a community. What are the opportunities for sharing personal prayers in your community? These might be eloquently written or use simple words.
- The Greek word 'stenagmois' in Romans 8:26 can be translated as an unvoiced 'sigh' or 'groan'. Silent prayer can be a place of peace, but it can also be an expression of anguish beyond words. How have you experienced this?



## Activity

Philip Yancey describes prayer using the metaphor of playing a musical instrument. "I go over basic notes (the Lord's Prayer), practise familiar pieces (the Psalms), and try out a few new tunes."<sup>6</sup> Do you think you need to spend more time on the basic notes, familiar pieces, or new tunes? On the image below, write down familiar prayers (such as liturgy or your personal repeated prayers) by the notes. Then try writing a brand new prayer beneath.



## Let us pray

Today we will practise different ways to pray silently. Some examples are available at [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](http://methodist.org.uk/sunshine). You might want to:

- draw pictures of things you want to pray for
- draw a prayer labyrinth
- doodle mindfully or draw a mind map using single words or short phrases in bubble clouds (rather than full sentences)
- pick a postcard or newspaper photo and use it to focus your prayers. What is God drawing your attention to?
- sit or lie down and close your eyes. Ask God to speak to you. If you become distracted, use a short phrase such as "Lord Jesus" or "hear my prayer" to bring your attention back to God.

## Follow up

### Reflect

What do you observe about the different ways you pray this week? Is there a prayer form that you're neglecting, or one you go to by default?

### Act

If you tend towards eloquently written prayers, try more silent or simple prayers like the one above. You could try drawing, journaling, crafting, walking in nature, using icons or something else to pray in a more creative way and use different senses than you would normally.

If you find writing or saying your own prayers hard, try to write your own prayer this week. To help you focus, imagine it is something that could be shared in worship or at a house group. You can use scripture and written prayers known to you already for inspiration. Don't worry about spelling or grammar, just focus on putting your thoughts into words.

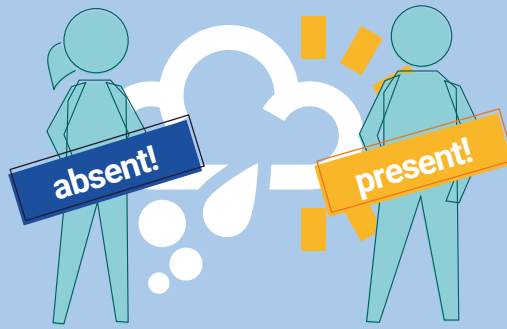
### Prepare

In the next session, we are discussing the paradox that God is always present, but that we don't always feel God's presence. When and where do you feel God's presence? Where are the places where you do not experience God?

### Go deeper

- Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*
- Benjamin Kandt, 'Praying the Psalms in community':  
[praypsalms.org/praying-the-psalms-in-small-groups-1d6d06152230](https://praypsalms.org/praying-the-psalms-in-small-groups-1d6d06152230)
- Ideas for prayer walks: [hopeforeveryhome.org/Groups/359712/Walk.aspx](https://hopeforeveryhome.org/Groups/359712/Walk.aspx)
- Inclusive and contemporary prayers, reflections and liturgy:  
[enfleshed.com/liturgy-library](https://enfleshed.com/liturgy-library)
- Stella Bristow, *Sensing God*

For more online resources visit [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/sunshine)



## Session 4: When prayer is hard

I don't feel God's presence ◀

▶ God is always with me

*Sometimes our friends are right here when we need them. Even if we don't see them for a long time, we still consider them as being close friends. At other times we lose that connection. They are nowhere to be seen and just don't seem to understand our desperation; we feel alone. What has changed?*

### Watch animation 'Session 4: When prayer is hard'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of prayer?

I don't feel God's presence

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

God is always with me

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always



## The good news

God isn't a friend who ever leaves us, but we can sometimes feel as if God is not there with us. Though we sometimes lose that sense of connection, the separation is just an illusion – God never leaves us.

## Introductory prayer

*O God of all creation,  
Where are you hiding when I need you most?  
In my pain and anguish where are you, God?  
When I feel I can't go on – where are you now?  
When I long for easy answers,  
you know my need in this moment.  
When I long for instant solutions,  
you know what will enable me to thrive.  
When I think I know best,  
I know deep down  
that only you have such insight.  
Teach me O Lord, the value  
of waiting in your presence,  
of looking up and beyond what  
I see immediately before me.  
Grant me the grace to watch for signs of you  
even in my bleakest times.  
When my head says you are with me,  
but my heart feels so alone,  
help me to walk on in faith  
knowing that I will turn a corner  
and see you there.  
Amen.*



## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation video: 'When prayer is hard'?

- Are there particular times or places where you feel less aware of God's presence?
- When and where are you most likely to be aware of God?
- How often do you feel a sense of God's absence?
- How often do you experience the reality of God's constant presence?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussions and questions throughout the session.*



## Watch 'Conversation 4: When prayer is hard'

### Response

#### Discussion

- Which of the prayer experiences shared in the video do you most relate to?
- What makes us feel distant from God?
- How easy is it for our hearts to rejoice in our difficult times?
- How can we reconnect with God, like finding an old friend on Facebook?
- Emily Freeman said "Sometimes when I think I'm waiting for God, I wonder if he's actually waiting on me" (*Simply Tuesday*). Does this resonate with you? Why, or why not?

#### Activity

Split the group in half. One half should put themselves in the psalmist's shoes, and the others in God's shoes. Then read Psalm 13 together, imagining you are the psalmist/God.

How did the psalmist group think they might have felt when writing those words?

How did the other group imagine God might have responded?

Verses 5 and 6 in the Psalm have a different feel. How do you persevere in prayer when God seems distant?

## Let us pray

It can be difficult to be thankful in challenging circumstances, but it's a good practice to cultivate. Go round the room and each share something you're grateful for this week. Pray together with thanks to God for all these gifts God has offered you this week.

## Follow up

### Reflect

During the week reflect on the times you feel God's presence or absence. You might want to make some notes.

- What is going on in your life at these points?
- Are there different things that trigger these emotions?
- How do these feelings affect your prayer life?

### Act

When you feel God's presence this week, whether in a dedicated prayer time or at a random moment in the day, thank God for being with you. When you feel God's absence, pause and pray for reconnection. You could use one of the Psalms of Lament if you find it difficult to form your own words. You might want to watch this video for encouragement:

[youtube.com/watch?v=RIV6I\\_gcEac](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIV6I_gcEac).

## Prepare

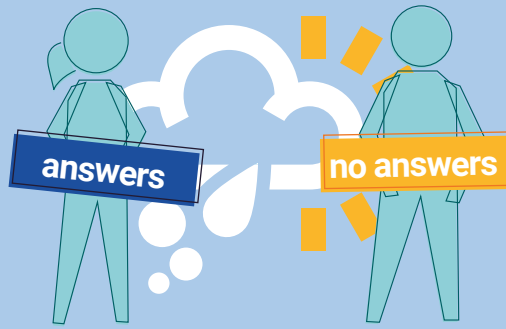
Next week we will be looking at the paradox that God answers our prayers, but sometimes our prayers don't seem to be answered. We will consider this particularly in relation to prayers for healing. Have there been times when you have prayed repeatedly, but the outcome you desperately desired was not forthcoming?

## Go deeper

- John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring our hunger to belong*
- Carla Grosh Miller, *Psalms Redux: Poems and Prayers*
- Esther De Waal, *Lost in Wonder: Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentiveness*

Visit [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/sunshine) for more resources.





## Session 5: Praying for healing

God answers my prayers ◀

▶ God doesn't answer my prayers

*Our friends may often reply immediately when we send them a message. Sometimes they don't reply at all. Usually our friends act when we ask them to, but sometimes it might be in a different way, or at a different time, than we expected. Sometimes what we think we most need in answer to our prayers simply does not happen. Why is this?*

### Watch animation 'Session 5: Praying for healing'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of prayer?

#### God answers my prayers

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

#### God does not answer my prayers

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

Just as our friends don't always communicate as we expect (or want!), God always responds to prayers for healing, but it might not look like what we expect. God will restore all things, but not necessarily now. Healing is not the same as curing; God might reply in a very different way, including reminding us that praying for a cure isn't always the right thing to do. But our prayers are always heard.

## Introductory prayer

Sit in silence and slowly scan through your body from feet upwards. Thank God for each part of your body and all that it enables you to do. For any area where you desire healing, simply place your hand in that area for a moment during your scan.

## Conversation starter

### How do you respond to the animation: 'Praying for healing'?

- What have been your experiences of answered and apparently unanswered prayers?
- Was there a time when you prayed for healing? How did God respond?
- How often do you feel like God answers your prayers?
- How often do you feel like God doesn't answer your prayers?

**Please note:** it is not always appropriate to pray for 'a cure'; please tread carefully. For example, don't assume that people will want to be 'cured' of disability or mental illness. They may feel it is part of their identity. If people do want prayer, we should always ask them what to pray for, rather than making assumptions. The best prayer is always to ask for what will bring someone into a richer relationship with God. This is the ultimate healing.

*"As I have carried on in this church, God has not taken away my mental illness, but he has removed the sting from it by enabling me to have insight into my illness and manage it very well. My identity is not defined by my illness. I am proud to call myself a Christian. I think this is from God's Holy Spirit living in me. He also gives me a wonderful sense of belonging to God's family on earth."*

*Use this space to make notes from the discussions and questions throughout the session.*





## Watch 'Conversation 5: Praying for healing'

### Response

#### Discussion

- Which of the prayer experiences shared in the video do you most relate to?
- Philip Yancey says "No human being, no matter how wise or how spiritual, can interpret the ways of God, explaining why one miracle and not another, why an apparent intervention here and not there. Along with the apostle Paul, we can only wait, and trust."<sup>8</sup> Do you find this comforting or frustrating?
- Do you think God only heals through supernatural miracles? How else do you think God can answer prayers for healing?
- Martin Laird says "True healing happens when we go into our pain so deeply that we see it, not just as our pain, but everyone's pain."<sup>9</sup> What do you think this means?
- Why is praying for healing a regular part of your personal prayers, or prayers in community (or why is it not?)?



## Activity

Each of the passages below relates in different ways to praying for healing. Allocate one or two of the quotes to each member of the group, along with two different coloured pens or highlighters. Ask people to read their passage to themselves and highlight anything that encourages healing prayer and God's ability to heal in one colour, and anything that provokes questions in another colour. Share your thoughts and questions together. How do these stories affect how you think about praying for healing?

See also: *John 11*; *2 Kings 5:10-15*; *Mark 5:25-34*

### **A thorn in the flesh, 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 (NRSVA)**

"Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

### **Praying for the sick, James 5:13-16 (NRSVA)**

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

### **Faith and healing, Matthew 8:5-13 (NRSVA)**

“When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, ‘Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress.’ And he said to him, ‘I will come and cure him.’ The centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.’ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith...’ And Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.”

### **The God of comfort, 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NRSVA)**

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.”



## Let us pray

Pray for healing (spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, etc.) for one another. If there is no one in the immediate group who wishes to have prayers for healing, pray for others known to you in need of healing.

Do not share any names or break any confidences about the circumstances someone is facing. You could do this by building a prayer cairn. Each person takes a stone to represent the person they want to be prayed for. Place the stone on the cairn and say, for example, “for someone I know who is living with cancer” or simply “for my sibling in Christ”.

## Follow up

### Reflect

Reflect on times in your life when you have been grateful to God for answered prayers, and times where you felt your prayers were unanswered. Has this session shed any new light on those situations? Seek help from a presbyter or pastoral support if these thoughts trigger you now.

### Act

Spend some time this week thinking and praying about who or what you could pray healing prayers for. This might include prayers of healing of illness or conflict, or of creation and restoration. Where appropriate, practise asking people what prayers they would like, rather than making assumptions.

### Prepare

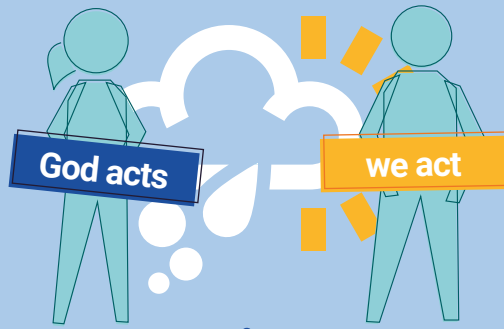
Next week will be our final session. Take a few minutes this week to glance back over your booklet and journal – what do you notice as you reflect back?

## Go deeper

- Guidelines for Good Practice for those involved in the Christian healing ministry: [methodist.org.uk/for-churches/guidance-for-churches/pastoral-care/healing-ministry](https://methodist.org.uk/for-churches/guidance-for-churches/pastoral-care/healing-ministry)
- Hymns for healing project: [methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/posts/more-to-say-about-healing](https://methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/posts/more-to-say-about-healing)
- Carla Grosh Miller, *Lifelines*
- J Neville Ward, *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*

For more resources visit [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/sunshine)





## Session 6: Answering prayers ourselves

I pray for God to act ◀

▶ I act rather than pray

*A friendship group often has 'roles' – the organiser, the carer, the campaigner, the memory holder. We know who will act and what they will do because of our shared history together. When you pray, whom do you expect to act? God, someone else, or yourself? Let's explore this question by focusing on the issue of Challenging Injustice, one of the twelve practices of A Methodist Way of Life.*

### Watch animation 'Session 6: Answering prayers ourselves'

#### The paradox

To what degree do each of these statements, which seem to contradict each other, describe your experience of prayer?

I pray because I know that God will intervene

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

I act rather than pray: God gives us the gift of intervening

1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Always

## The good news

We don't always know when God will act, or what that would look like. But we can work together with God, remembering what happened last time we worked together. We get to participate in the *missio Dei* with God. We may be the means by which God answers our own prayers or those of others.

## Introductory prayer

*To be read by the facilitator.*

*Stand or sit with your arms raised to the sky or hands held open. We pause for a moment in silence to listen to God.*

*Hold your hands by your eyes. God, open our eyes to injustice in the world.*

[Pause]

*Hold your hands over your mouth. As they come to you, name aloud local, national or international issues of injustice.*

[Pause for response]

*God, give us courage to speak and act to challenge injustice.*

*Let us say together the first verse of Make me a channel of your peace:*

*Make me a channel of your peace*

*Where there is hatred let me bring your love*

*Where there is injury, your pardon Lord*

*And where there is doubt true faith in you.*

*Amen.*



## Conversation starter

### **How do you respond to the animation video: 'Answering prayers ourselves'?**

- Some people withdraw from the world into stillness and pure attention on the Divine. Others see prayer as action and engaged presence: to work is to pray. Which connects more with you, or are you somewhere in the middle?
- When has the answer to prayer come in a form you really didn't expect?
- Are there times when, with hindsight, you think you missed God answering a prayer because it wasn't the answer you were looking for?
- How have you been the answer to a prayer (yours or someone else's)?
- How often do you pray expecting God to act?
- How often do you pray expecting humans to act – or not pray at all in favour of God acting?
- What makes an action of God a miracle?

*Use this space to make notes from the discussions and questions throughout the session.*



## Watch 'Conversation 6: Answering prayers ourselves'

### Response

#### Discussion

- Which of the prayer experiences shared in the video do you most relate to?
- Read Amos 5:21-24 and James 2:14-16. How is challenging injustice part of our prayer and worship of God?
- John Wesley reportedly said: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can." He also said "Prayer is where the action is." How do you balance prayer and action in your life?
- Share examples of how you discern when prayer needs to be action.
- Philip Yancey said: "Consistently, God chooses the course of action in which human partners can contribute most."<sup>10</sup> How do you partner with God?
- We don't always know when God will act, or what it will look like. How do we practise patience and wait prayerfully, rather than forging ahead ourselves?

#### Activity

On big sheets of paper, write down issues of injustice that need prayer and action. These could be local, national or global.

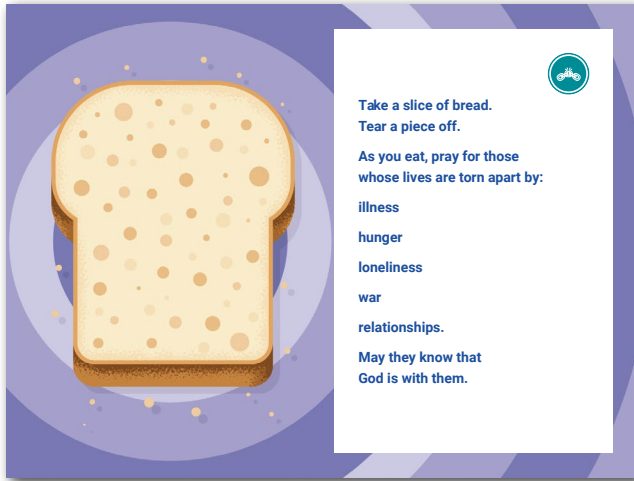
In a different colour, write down ways you can respond this week, for example creating an online petition or volunteering at the local foodbank.

Read the suggestions together. Each person should pick one thing they will pray about this week and one action they will take (these might relate to different justice issues). Write your name down by the thing you've chosen.



## Let us pray

Today we will pray a prayer of intercession using one of the prayers from the Intergenerational Prayer Cards (see [methodist.org.uk/PrayerCards](http://methodist.org.uk/PrayerCards)).



## Ending well

Pause now before we finish this short series to consider what you would like to do differently because of all you have thought, heard or witnessed.

### Reflect

How might God be calling you to act and pray to challenge injustice today?

How will you pray to challenge injustice in community settings?

Who might you have a conversation about prayer with, to encourage and challenge them?

### Act

Make a plan for how you will continue to practise some of the things highlighted in this course. It might be something very specific, such as spending more time in silent prayer, or praying aloud more in your small group. Note down what you would like to do at the back of your booklet

## Go deeper

- Black Liturgy, Instagram: [instagram.com/blackliturgies/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/blackliturgies/?hl=en)
- Prayer and action resources from the Joint Public Issues Team: [jpit.uk/resources/stay-and-pray](https://jpit.uk/resources/stay-and-pray) and [jpit.uk/category/prayers](https://jpit.uk/category/prayers) and All We Can: [allwecan.org.uk/get-involved/pray](https://allwecan.org.uk/get-involved/pray)

For more resources visit [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/sunshine)

## Final thoughts...

Although this course has ended, your prayer journey continues. Think about how you can keep exploring prayer over the coming weeks and months. Would it help to have a prayer buddy? Are there any ways you would like to continue to explore and go deeper? Will you commit to continuing to pray for the people on your course? For more information and resources, go to [methodist.org.uk/pray](https://methodist.org.uk/pray) and [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](https://methodist.org.uk/sunshine)



## Notes for course facilitators

### Course overview

This is a six-session course, and each session looks at a different prayer paradox. It is probably best to run the sessions in the order suggested as each one builds on the previous session. You might want to run the course over six consecutive weeks, but it can work over a longer timespan too.

This booklet can be used throughout the course to make notes and journal; as leader, please encourage participants to make use of it, including the sections to fill out before the meeting. This will help people reflect better and get more out of the course, as well as giving them a memento to look back on at the end. You can run the course with a small group meeting together physically, a bigger group that breaks into smaller groups for discussion, or online.

The six sessions each have a core paradox. We do not try and resolve them simplistically, but instead aim to find good news in the tension.

1. Prayer as friendship. Do you find prayer life-giving, or boring?
2. Praying as rhythm. Do you pray at special times in the day, or all day long?
3. Forms of prayer. Are your prayers eloquent and carefully crafted, or more like a silent longing?
4. When prayer is hard. Does God feel absent or present when you pray?
5. Praying for healing. Does God answer our prayers?
6. Answering prayers ourselves. Do we act, or does God act?

All additional resources needed to run this course, including all the videos, are available at [methodist.org.uk/sunshine](http://methodist.org.uk/sunshine)

### Session outline

Each session has the following recommended structure, though of course you may need to adapt this to suit your circumstances.

#### **Welcome [5-10 minutes]**

Please tailor the introductions to your group. Be aware that not everyone will know each other – they may not even know you!

*Session 1:* Take time to introduce each other and any roles people are contributing (hospitality, pastoral support, facilitation, etc.). Will you encourage participants to sit with people they don't know, or are you trying to build prayer confidence within established local groups? You may find it helpful to give name badges and to ask people to sit with the group indicated on their name badge.

Introduce the booklet and explain that it mirrors the themes that will be followed each week. There is space to note down what stands out, to make a reminder of the top tips from others in the group and to make a note of the actions you would like to take yourself.

As people settle, play the 'Sunshine and showers' introduction animation.

*Sessions 2-6:* As people arrive, introduce any newcomers. You might want to remind people of the theme of the course, or re-watch the introductory animation. Encourage everyone to share with each other how they have reflected on prayer this week. What have they practised since the last session? Where have they experienced God at work? You might want to go first if people are hesitant to share. Remember, you are a participant too.

Finish the introductions with a short prayer. A suggested prayer is given in each session's notes. You could read it out, ask for a volunteer, or say a line each.

All weeks: Remind people of the ideas of paradox and dissonance on page 4, and the format of the session. Explain how to make this a safe and inclusive conversation:

- Recognise different views.
- Celebrate where people are in their journey.
- 'Step up or step back': if you tend to be quiet in discussions, step up and offer your thoughts. If you like to participate in discussions, step back and open the space for others.

### **Animation video [5 minutes]**

Play the short animation that introduces the session's paradox.

### **Conversation starter: Small group discussion [15 minutes]**

Look at the first paradox statement. In the box in the booklet, ask people to give themselves a number between one and ten, to reflect how often they feel this describes their own prayer life (where one is never and ten is always). Encourage them to be honest with themselves, and remind them that we are not trying to criticise ourselves or other people. Encourage people to share why they gave themselves these scores, if they are comfortable to do so.

Repeat for the other paradox statement.

### **Conversation video [5 minutes]**

Play the video of people sharing their ideas and stories about this aspect of prayer.

### **Response: Discussion [20 minutes]**

Each session in the booklet provides a selection of verses from Scripture and ideas from the church tradition, with associated questions. Use these to explore the paradox from different angles. You might want to pick which questions to discuss, or ask someone in the group to choose one that appeals to them during the session. Try to use a variety of different prompts (Scripture, writers, questions) over the different sessions, as people will connect in different ways.

### **Response: Activity [20 minutes]**

Each session also provides a suggested creative activity that will give people a chance to reflect on the ideas in a different way. Some might need resources so make sure you read these in advance.

### **Prayer [15 minutes]**

Spend some time praying as a group. You can say together the prayer on page 7 of the booklet. Each session also contains some ideas for group prayer that match the theme of the session. Remember that not everyone may be comfortable praying in the same way. While encouraging people to try new prayer techniques, allow people to ultimately participate in the way they choose.

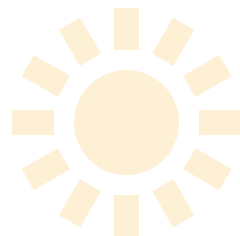
## Follow up

Each session provides three ways for people to continue to explore the theme:

- Reflect: suggestions for continued thinking about the issue.
- Act: a practical activity to try.
- Prepare: some thoughts to pave the way for the next session.

Consider checking in with people in between the sessions, and remind them of what they can do to prepare for the next session. You could send them any tips or resources suggested during the session, and a link to where they can watch the videos online.

At the end of the course, you might wish to keep in occasional touch with people so you can share stories of how your prayer life evolves – make sure you get permission to do this.





## A closing prayer

**God, my friend.**

*Help me to keep company with you.*

*Help me to pray at special times, and all the time.*

*Help me to communicate richly and deeply.*

*Help me learn that you never leave me.*

*Help me to find beauty in the mystery.*

*And may we together bring healing and hope to the world.*

**Amen.**





A space for notes, doodles, prayers, questions and encouragements

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: does it make any difference?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lovelace quoted in David Wilkinson, *When I pray what does God do?* (Monarch Books, 2015), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: does it make any difference?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), chapter 22.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now*, (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009). See also: [youtube.com/watch?v=SilgjFpdtwM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SilgjFpdtwM) (accessed 24 May 2023)

<sup>5</sup> Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: does it make any difference?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), chapter 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Becoming a more fully inclusive Methodist Church: Why does it matter?:* [methodist.org.uk/media/25623/jds-why-does-this-matter-quotations-0522.pdf](https://methodist.org.uk/media/25623/jds-why-does-this-matter-quotations-0522.pdf) (accessed 12/04/2023).

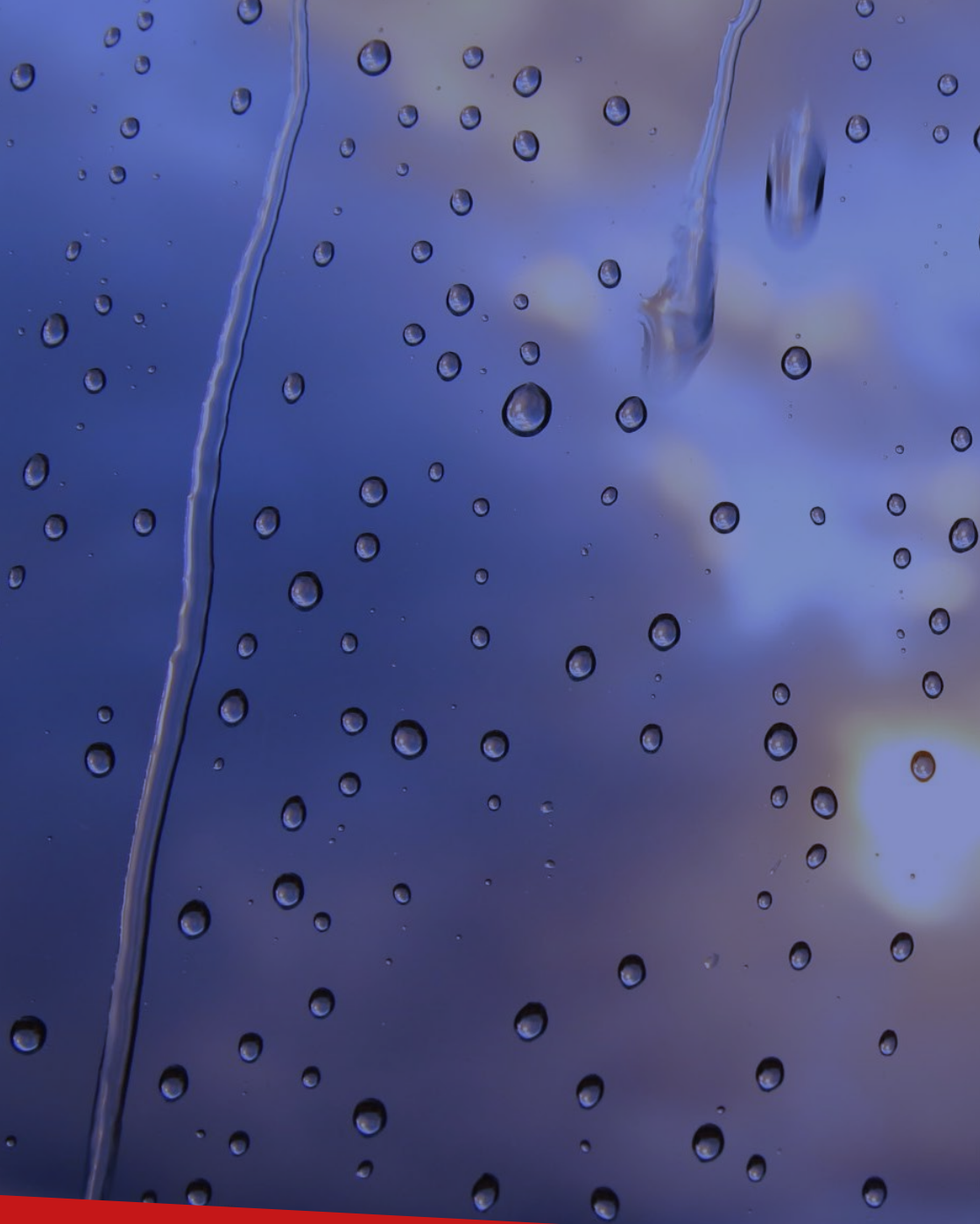
<sup>8</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: does it make any difference?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), chapter 17.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Yancey, *Prayer: does it make any difference?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), chapter 17.

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This work has been made possible by generous funding from Benefact Trust.



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EGSSPCP223

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