

## STUDY GUIDE

**Monday, August 17 – Read 1 Peter 5:5-7** Over the next seven days, we will explore a reality that is so simple, we miss its seriousness. Here it is: God hears us when we pray. It's that simple. And that profound. Unless we sit in this truth, we will miss how incredible and life-altering it is. In 1 Peter 5, Peter tells us to humble ourselves before the Lord and to cast our cares upon him. He explains that we have an adversary who is attacking us and that Christians throughout the world are suffering. But in verse 7 he grounds his command to cast our cares upon the Lord in a simple truth: "because he cares for you." How often do we take that short phrase for granted? Of course he cares for us! But think about it for a moment. Why should he? Don't forget that the same Bible that makes this statement also tells us that all human beings have rejected God (see Romans 1), that everyone has sinned and refuses to seek after God (see Romans 3), and that we are all dead in our sins (see Ephesians 2). There is no logical step between "we have all rejected him" and "he cares for us." And yet there it is. Illogical. But real. Stop right now to consider: God cares for you. So? So cast your cares upon him. He cares about you, so he wants to hear what's concerning you. It's that simple. But this simple realization will change your life. Let it. Right this second, God is listening to you. He cares, so he hears. Say something to him. What you say doesn't matter right now. Practice believing the reality that he is listening and he cares what you will say. Then say something. Anything. Because he hears.

**Tuesday, August 18 – Read Matthew 6:25-34** Jesus told us that we do not need to be anxious. Specifically, he mentions food, drink, and clothing. Most of us believe in trusting God. We're on board with Jesus' "don't be anxious" advice here. This will get us through much of life, but when life unravels, it's impossible not to worry. If you're having trouble paying for a vacation, earning a passing grade, or hoping for a promotion, you can take Jesus' advice easily enough. But if you're not sure where you'll find food, water, or clothing, then things are not okay! This is a desperate situation! Life and death! And yet it is precisely these fundamental elements that Jesus tells us not to worry about. Why? Look at the birds, he says. They're not actively trying to grow their own food, yet God feeds them. So you don't need to worry either. What is this logic? We see the birds flying around, presumably looking for food. But it's not at all obvious that God is the one feeding them. God has taught them to look for food, and—though it isn't clear to the onlooker—he ensures that they find what they need. It isn't a dramatic, noticeably miraculous act. But it is God's daily provision. The logic here is to go ahead and tell God what you need rather than being anxious about it. Why? Because he cares about our needs, and he hears our prayers. Even if it doesn't seem like it. Perhaps you look at your situation and can't see God working. That's okay. That's how it is with the birds as well. But God cares. And he's working, even when he doesn't appear to be claiming the credit. He's listening. Whatever it is, talk to him about it right now.

**Wednesday, August 19 – Read Matthew 7:7-12** Prayer is not rigid, or a like a formula. It's not an incantation that, if said correctly, will magically provide what we've summoned. But then there are statements like Matthew 7:7-12, where Jesus says that if we ask, we will receive. How does that work? We can be sure that Jesus is not trying to give us a formula or a blank check. Instead, he is teaching us something about our relationship with God and the way he responds to our concerns. Too often, we treat prayer like a karma-driven algorithm. We ask God for the things we really want, but we don't expect him to give us precisely that. Life has taught us not to expect a favorable answer. We never really believed that we deserved it, anyway. But that approach is at odds with Jesus' words here. Because prayer has nothing to do with our performance. It's not about karma. Prayer is about a relationship with God, who happens to be a loving father. Just as a loving father would not give his daughter a snake when she asks for a fish or a stone when she asks for bread, so our loving father will not try to trick, disappoint, or punish us in response to our requests. Why? Because he loves us. So he listens to our requests. If you've ever earnestly asked God for something good and instead received something devastating, you need to hear these words from Jesus. Prayer is relational. Your father loves you. Keep praying, because he cares about your wellbeing. He wants you to continue to draw near. It's not a procedure that works exactly the same every time, it's a relationship. And your father's end goal is to bless you. Lean into that as you pray.

**Thursday, August 20 – Read Psalms 139** Not only does the Bible teach that God listens when we pray, it's also clear that he listens BEFORE we pray. Psalm 139 is eloquent in saying that before we can even form a word on our lips, God already knows what we're going to say. He knows the words before we do. He's listening before it even occurs to us to speak. There is never a moment when God is not there with you. If you accidentally find yourself in a situation where you're in trouble and feel far from God, he's there! If you have actively tried to run from him, doing your best to get yourself in the darkest possible situation, he's there too! On the very top of the list of things you're completely incapable of doing is getting to a

place where God won't hear you. David even says that if you could count the grains of sand on the shore, you still wouldn't be approaching the number of times God thinks about you. He's more attentive than the most attentive friend or spouse. He's always there—not as a policeman, but as a friend, ultra-concerned to hear what is on your mind. This is the confidence we must carry into prayer. As you finish this devotional and close your eyes to pray, God will already have been listening to you. Waiting for you to speak. He cares. More than you could even begin to fathom. So what will you say? He knows your situation better than you do. Lay it all out there for him, including your own emotional and spiritual response. He cares. He's listening. He's longing to spend this time with you right now.

**Friday, August 21 – Read Psalms 46** Imagine being in a desperate situation and calling out for help but having no confidence that anyone is able to hear your call. Sometimes our prayers feel like a message in a bottle: we make a passionate plea for help but we have no idea if the message will ever reach anyone, and even then, how can we be sure the person who picks up the bottle will care about our situation or be able to do anything to help? Mercifully, prayer is not like this. God hears. And he cares. And he is able. Read through Psalm 46 to gain assurance of each of these truths. Our God is a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. The wording is interesting. What does it mean that he is VERY present? "Very" is an intensifier, but we don't usually intensify the word "present." You're either there or you're not. But the Psalmist does not want us to undervalue God's presence: He is VERY PRESENT when we are in trouble. Read through the rest of the Psalm. Everything in the world around you can fall apart, but God is there. And he is all that matters. When the world is crumbling all around—even if it literally crumbles but certainly if it does so metaphorically—we don't need to be worried. The end of the Psalm has given comfort to God's people for thousands of years: Be still and know that he is God. As long as we are desperately fighting to rectify our situation, we may miss the unmistakable reality that God is right there with us. But if we can pause in prayer and be mindful of his presence, then we will know the only thing that matters: he is God.

**Saturday, August 22 – Read Matthew 27:45-50, Acts 2:22-24. Acts 4:23-31** Some of the most devastating words in the Bible come as Jesus is hanging on the cross. He is on the cross because of his obedience to the Father. He has faithfully accomplished everything he was sent to earth to accomplish, and his faithfulness has now led him to be hanging on a cross, moments from death, falsely accused but lovingly dying in the place of rebellious humanity. This is the culminating moment in Jesus' faithful completion of everything the Father sent him to earth to accomplish. And yet it is at this moment that Jesus cries out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?!" When we see the apostles preaching in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection, they have no doubt that Jesus' death was "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God," that it was what "God's hand had predestined to take place." In other words, Jesus' crucifixion was squarely at the center of God's will. God has never been more actively working than in those moments when Jesus breathed his last. And yet in this very moment of God's intentional activity, Jesus felt abandoned by God. What does this say for us? It means that those moments when we feel God is the most absent—when it could not be more clear that he is not listening to our prayers—he may well be more at work than we could imagine. Isn't this what we should expect with God? He is always working. So even when we have clear evidence that God is not listening, we need to challenge our assumptions. He may be accomplishing something great.

**Sunday, August 23 – Read Revelation 6:9-11, Revelation 8:1-5** Revelation is a crazy book. This is hardly the place to sort out its complexity or fit it into a theological system. But read Revelation 6:9-11 and 8:1-5 while asking what God thinks about prayer. For context, the "seals" being opened are unraveling a scroll that, as it's read one broken seal at a time, is revealing God's plan to wrap up the loose ends and recover his world from the forces of evil. The fifth seal reveals those people who have been killed for their faithfulness to God, and they are crying out (praying!) for God to work, to vindicate their deaths, to do what finally must be done to end all of the evil that swirls about this broken world. After the seventh seal is opened, an angel offers incense before God. The smoke of this incense rises up before the Lord, and that incense is mixed with the prayers of the saints. Then world-shattering events begin to take place. We need to see that when God acts to fix all the wrong that has tormented his world, the prayers of his people play a vital role. What happens to all of the prayers we send to the Lord? They rise up like smoke before him. They find their intended destination! And this is crucial to his work of rolling back evil and redeeming the world he still loves. This is the encouragement we need to keep praying. We don't know how our prayers will ultimately be used, but God has a purpose for these prayers. They're part of his plan to heal and restore. Let your prayers continue to rise, confident that they are valuable to God.

*Adapted from: <https://new.echoprayer.com/>*