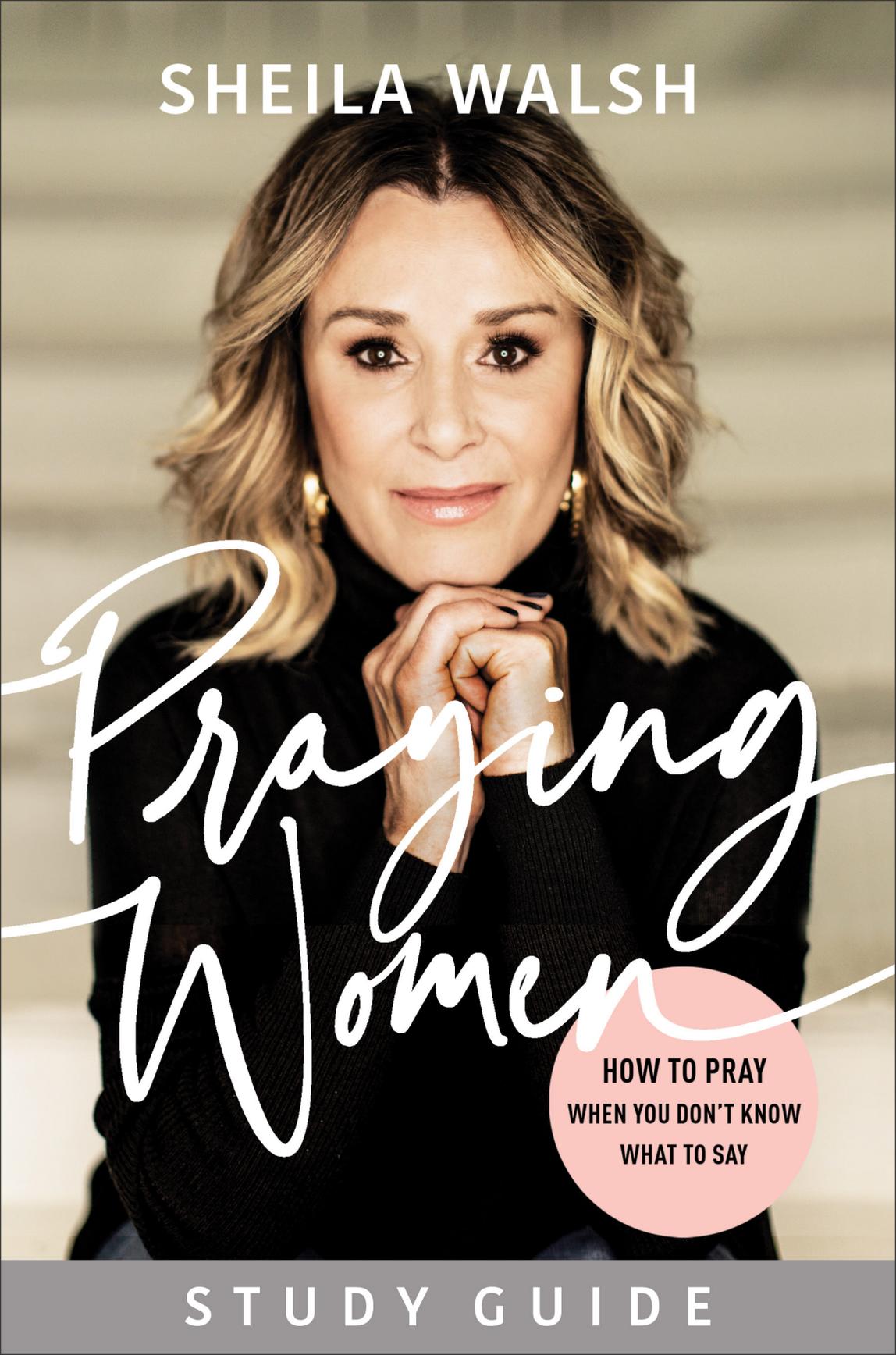


SHEILA WALSH



Praying
Women

HOW TO PRAY
WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW
WHAT TO SAY

STUDY GUIDE

STUDY GUIDE

EIGHT SESSIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS & GROUPS

Praying Women

HOW TO PRAY
WHEN YOU DON'T
KNOW WHAT TO SAY

SHEILA WALSH



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The Holy Spirit wants to teach us how to pray
and also show us that it's not as complicated
as we've made it.

introduction, *Praying Women*

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From One Praying Woman to Another

Dear friend,

Over the last two years, there has been one thing burning in me, heart and soul: a call to prayer. But this call has not been for me alone; it's a call for all God's daughters to pick up one of the most powerful weapons we have: prayer. So often we turn to prayer as a last resort after we've done everything we can, but I believe it should be the first place we turn.

Perhaps prayer is intimidating to you and you struggle to find the right words. Perhaps you've stopped praying because it seems to make no difference. Or perhaps you are simply overwhelmed and worn out. I understand all these emotions. More importantly, so does our Father.

Wherever you find yourself today, I want to remind you that God is not looking for the right words, just a willing heart.

So let's dive in together and rise up stronger. When God's daughters fall on their knees to pray, the battle is not over; it is just beginning.

*Your sister and friend,
Sheila*

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has
great power and produces wonderful results.

James 5:16

SESSION 1

Starting Where You Are

Our Prayer to God: “Help Me!”

I’d promised to be perfect, to never disappoint God, and here I was, on my face on the floor, empty. The only words I silently prayed were these: “Help me.”

chapter 1, *Praying Women*

I prayed to the Lord, and He answered me. He freed me from all my fears.

Psalm 34:4

“Help me!”

Those were the words I cried out in pain when I had come to the end of myself. I’d spent so many years trying to be the perfect Christian woman, to never fail God, yet here I was on the floor, in a small room in a psychiatric hospital, feeling as if my life was over. That was over twenty-five years ago. What I would go on to discover is that when we are at the end of who we are, we are just at the beginning of who God is. Starting where you are right now may feel hopeless and impossible, but when you invite

God into that space, you will see that it's actually an open door into all God has for you.

Are you in a “help me” place right now? You're so overwhelmed that the only prayer you can muster up is “Lord, please help me!” Even then it can feel more like throwing up a white flag of surrender than a genuine cry for help. Let's face it, we are stretched so thin these days that prayer is often the last few words we utter before falling exhausted into bed. We want to spend more time in prayer during the day, but our to-do list gets longer every week, and let's be honest; life is stressful. To be alive today is to be acquainted with stress. There is good stress, like welcoming a new child or moving into a new home or job, but when most of us hear the word *stress*, it's not the joy-filled kind that comes to mind. It's the overwhelming, soul-crushing kind. Let me list just a few and see which ones you most relate to.

There are work-related pressures to deal with.

There are financial concerns to manage.

Relationships always provide opportunities for stress to rear its ugly head.

You may have chronic health concerns.

Family issues may seem overwhelming

You may experience, as so many do, information overload—too much social media, too many voices, too many opinions, way too much bad news.

In a recent study, the Mayo Clinic looked at how people react to these stressful events.¹ The results were troubling.

- People turned to anger, blaming friends, family members, and co-workers for their heavy load.
- People turned to food, at times even eating when they weren't hungry.

- People turned to self-loathing, letting negative self-talk have its way.
- People turned to substances—alcohol, cigarettes, drugs.

Although most people say that they have some belief in God, far too many people who were surveyed didn't turn to the one thing that could actually help: prayer.

Whenever you have encountered stress in life, what has been your typical response? Spend a moment considering your answer, and then complete the prompt below.

What about You?

Complete this sentence starter:

When I find myself in need of help—because my thoughts are spinning, because my heart is heavy, because my circumstances feel chaotic and complex—my reflexive response, that thing I tend to do as if running on autopilot, is . . .

The Truth of the Matter

Spend a few moments reading the passage below. Then move on to the questions in the next section.

It's one thing to understand in our minds that we have a loving heavenly Father who doesn't simply *tolerate* our requests for help but *longs* to come to our aid; it's quite another to instinctively turn to Him in our distress and trust Him to lead us to higher ground. And yet that's precisely what He stands ready to do.

In Psalm 34, we see a powerful progression play out. David wrote:

I prayed to the LORD, and he answered me.
He freed me from all my fears.
Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy;
no shadow of shame will darken their faces.
In my desperation I prayed, and the LORD listened;
he saved me from all my troubles.
For the angel of the LORD is a guard;
he surrounds and defends all who fear him.
Taste and see that the LORD is good.
Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him! . . .
The LORD hears his people when they call to him for help.
He rescues them from all their troubles.
The LORD is close to the brokenhearted;
he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. (vv. 4-8, 17-18)

In response to the psalmist's prayer for help,

- God answers the pray-er
- He frees the pray-er from all fears
- He saves
- He defends
- He rescues

What wonderful promises lie in this passage! We can turn to God in prayer, knowing that He will hear us, that He will help us, and that He will sustain us day by day.

One of Satan's greatest achievements in the lives of believers is convincing us that God doesn't want to help us in our time of need. What a lie from the pit of hell to come against one of the foremost promises of our heavenly Father, that He will "never fail" us and will "never abandon" us (Heb. 13:5). God has promised to go ahead of us, to stand with us, to hem

us in behind and before, and to never leave our side. God has promised always to generously listen to us when we call.

God is near.

God longs to hear from us.

God loves to help us in our time of need.

We don't have to give in to despair, wondering how we'll make it through this raging storm. We only have to pause, look up from our circumstances, and pray one single word to Him: "Help."

That's it: help.

We start where we are when it comes to prayer. And so much of the time, where we are is desperately in need of help.

I prayed to the LORD, and he answered me.

He freed me from all my fears.

Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy;

no shadow of shame will darken their faces.

In my desperation I prayed, and the LORD listened;

he saved me from all my troubles.

For the angel of the LORD is a guard;

he surrounds and defends all who fear him.

Taste and see that the LORD is good.

Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him! . . .

The LORD hears his people when they call to him for help.

He rescues them from all their troubles.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted;

he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. (vv. 4–8, 17–18)

An Opportunity for Reflection

Work through the questions below at your own pace, taking as much time with each as you need.

1. In Psalm 34, we come across nine actions that God takes in response to those who pray to Him. Review the text in the sidebar and write the actions on the lines below. (The first one has been supplied for you.)

1. *He frees them from all their fears.* _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

2. David described those in need of God's aid as "brokenhearted." The Hebrew root of this word is *shabar*, and its meanings include "to burst, to destroy, to shatter, to shiver, to hurt, to break into pieces by crushing, to break down, to break off, to break up, to bring to the birth." Where in your life today do things feel shattered, broken down, brought back to their birth (brought back to the place where you first experienced this pain)?

[shabar: brokenhearted]

To burst, to destroy, to shatter, to shiver, to hurt, to break into pieces by crushing, to break down, to break off, to break up, to bring to the birth.

3. Based on this challenging situation you've noted, which of the nine actions of God seems most necessary or relevant to you? Place a star next to the form of care listed above that you most wish God would manifest in your life today.

What is it about this form of God's protection and/or provision in your life that seems so needed right now? Write down your thoughts.

4. If it's true that God longs to listen to us, to free us from our fears, to surround us and defend us and rescue us from every trouble, then we who love God should be jumping at the opportunity to take our troubles right to Him—shamelessly and enthusiastically. When you've struggled to pray in this manner, what has the source of your struggle been?

- Not knowing what to say
- Not believing that God wants to hear from you
- Trouble focusing because of busyness or fear
- Lack of faith that God will respond
- Something else

5. What encouragement do the following verses offer when you're struggling to find the right words or to believe that God will answer, when you're distracted, or when you lack faith? Look up each verse and write down the promise you discover there.

Psalm 91:15

John 14:27

Romans 8:26–27

1 John 5:14

In John 15:15, Jesus calls us by an intimate name. “I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my *friends*, since I have told you everything the Father told me” (emphasis added).

Do you see the important implication tucked inside this verse? “A master doesn’t confide in his slaves,” Jesus said, the implication being that a master *does* confide in his friends. *Our Master confides in us.*

Isn't that an amazing thing to think about? When we are overwhelmed by life, we can go to Jesus, and He will not only hear us and comfort us and respond to us but also confide in us as a dear friend, whispering truths that we need in that moment.

Jesus is prepared to confide in us, if only we will come and be still and ask for the help we need.

Practicing Prayer

We could keep talking about prayer, or we could pause here and pray. Certainly, knowing what God's Word says about prayer is useful, but at some point, the way for us to get better at prayer is simply to pray, and pray some more, and pray still more after that, talking with God as we would with a friend—frequently and honestly.

To set the stage for the prayer we will practice here, let's look at the story from Matthew 14 that is included in chapter 1 of the book *Praying Women*.

Immediately after this [the feeding of the five thousand], Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here."

Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

"Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. “You have so little faith,” Jesus said. “Why did you doubt me?” (vv. 22–31)

As the storm was raging and the winds were howling, Peter could think of only one thing to say: “Save me, Lord!”

Perhaps you can relate. When the storm clouds have gathered in your life and the rain has soaked you to the skin, have you ever turned your face heavenward and begged God for relief?

Save me, Father, I’m doubting!

Help me, Father, I’m drowning!

Rescue me, Father, I’m going under!

I simply can’t make it on my own!

What does your current “save me” prayer sound like, considering the challenge you’re facing right now? Write down the words to that prayer on the lines below.

It should encourage us to know that Jesus, who knew that Peter would falter and ultimately fail in his attempt to reach his Master by walking on the water, still said to Peter, “Come.”

When Peter looked at Jesus and said, “Lord, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water” (Matt. 14:28), without hesitation, Jesus said, “Yes, come” (v. 29).

Yes, come.

To the doubting: Yes, come.

To the drowning: Yes, come.

To the faltering: Yes, come.

To the failing: Yes, come.

To you, right in the midst of your struggle, and your imperfection, and your fear: Yes, come.

Now, you may be thinking, *Well, Jesus may have said, “Yes, come” to Peter, but there’s no way He’s saying that to me.*

We’re so quick to sideline ourselves from Jesus’s acceptance and grace, believing that, based on our specific fears and insecurities, His promises don’t apply to us.

If this is true for you, then before you move on, take a few minutes to put down on paper the things you think are disqualifying you from Jesus’s care by completing the prompts below.

I want to believe that Jesus’s response to my cry for help is “Yes, come,” but I always think that . . .

and I struggle with . . .

and I fear that . . .

and no matter how hard I try, I keep . . .

Be reminded that Jesus is near. Be reminded that He has mercy for you—and kindness and patience and love.

[yasha: rescues]

To be safe, defended, protected, preserved; to be rescued, delivered, saved.

Psalm 34:18 promises God’s close proximity to those whose lives are breaking apart: “He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.” *Yasha* is the Hebrew word used here: “to be safe, defended, protected, preserved; to be rescued, delivered, saved.”

Just as you were “saved” the first time you fully surrendered to Jesus, you are being saved by Him daily.

If you can, let go of the to-do list that’s waiting for you at the moment and decide to sit with God. Find a comfortable chair. Relax into a settled position. Reach for a pen if you’d like to write down what comes to your heart. And then let the prompts below guide you into a conversation with your Lord.

Lord Jesus, I would love to begin our conversation in some noble way, but the truth is that my mind is racing with thoughts of . . .

These situations and circumstances have left me feeling . . .

and afraid that . . .

I read the story of You “immediately” reaching out and grabbing Peter, saving him from the wind and waves, and all I can think is . . .

I want to believe that You will rescue me too, that You will . . .

“Help me.” That is the prayer I can pray today, given my deep need for . . .

How I hope that You will receive my prayer with . . .

Lord Jesus, today, please help me to . . .

In the same way that You saved me from my sin and pointed me to the path of redemption and restoration, please save me now from . . .

I choose to believe in this moment that Your heart toward me says, “Yes, come.” I choose to claim Your promises to me that You will . . .

and that You have . . .

and that You are . . .

In Jesus’s name I pray, amen.

Yes, Come

Before wrapping up your time, sit with the following “big idea” and then capture on the lines that follow your response—a commitment you’ll make, perhaps, or a few final words of prayer to God.

“Help me!”

What a powerful, two-word prayer. When a parent hears these words from their child, their instinct is to immediately jump in and help. The truth of the matter is that our heavenly Father feels the very same way but in every moment, every day, all the time.

“Yes, child,” He says to us, “come to Me with your need.”

“Yes, come!”

“Yes, *you*.”

“Yes, now.”

“When you have a relationship with Jesus,” I wrote in *Praying Women*, “prayer isn’t something you *do*; it’s who you *are*.”

And when we start to grasp just how eager our Lord is to help us, we will instinctively . . . joyfully . . . always desire to live as women who pray.
