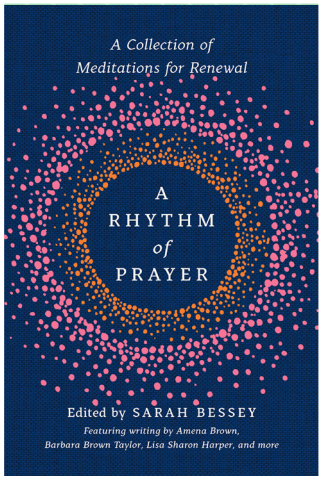
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Meg Lacy Vega



A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal

Edited by Sarah Bessey

About the Author

I have followed Sarah Bessey since the days of her first book, *Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women* (2013). I immediately resonated with Bessey's story, as a "fellow" evangelical woman seeking to make peace with scripture and tradition while also navigating her sense of calling. She brought a nuanced perspective to the conversation as a Canadian, removed from the politics of American religion, which I found to be helpful and refreshing. Since the publication of *Jesus Feminist*, Bessey has become a popular writer and speaker in progressive circles across North America and around the world. She has written a few more books, appeared on numerous podcasts, and is co-founder of Evolving Faith, a conference and community for those daring to reimagine what faith, justice, scripture and church can look like and become. She lives in Abbotsford, British Columbia, with her husband (of 20 years!) and her four children, who span elementary-age through high school.

About the Book

This collection of prayers is a gentle invitation into new ways of dwelling with, speaking to and hearing from God. In the introduction, Bessey says that we often think we have only two choices when it comes to reimagining our faith: "To double down or burn it down. So, when it comes to prayer," she says, "we might mistakenly believe that if we can't pray the way we used to or the way we were taught, somehow that means we can't or don't pray anymore, period… But prayer is still for you."

How many of us have found ourselves unsure of what prayer looks like for us now? This collection is a companion on the journey of prayer, a reminder that even if our previous ways of praying feel like they no longer fit, we are still able to pray. The prayers in this collection act as a guide. The authors who have penned the prayers in *A Rhythm of Prayer* cover a wide spectrum of age, denomination, ethnic and cultural heritage and life experiences; their prayers reflect the depth and breadth of spirituality and faith that they embody. From liturgy to lament, guided meditation to gratitude and thanksgiving, this book can be entered at different places, by different people, at different times. It can used for personal meditation or public worship, as an offering of comfort or a call to action. Regardless of how and where the prayers are

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employed, this collection promises to set the reader (the prayer!) on a journey of the good, hard, holy work of reclaiming and reimagining prayer for today.

A Word about How to Use this Guide

This book unfolds in three movements: orientation, disorientation and reorientation. The questions and activities below follow this pattern; but the reader need not feel the need to move through these questions in such a linear fashion.

If your group will be meeting only once, instead of trying to cover all the questions, pick and choose a few that feel particularly resonant for you. If your group will be meeting multiple times, as you read, you can organize your conversations around this three-fold pattern, or choose other themes that the group is most drawn toward. As you lead, remember that a conversation about prayer is also a form of prayer itself. Make room for silence, journaling, drawing or mediation. Consider opening and closing with a few of the prayer experiences from the book (particularly those that feel most unfamiliar to you). You could even choose to use some of these questions as prompts for journaling throughout your conversation; so allow participants moments to pause, reflect and consider their own prayer.

"Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone or in the deep, deep woods, and I'd look up into the sky—up—up—up—into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just feel a prayer"

L.M. Montgomery from *Anne of Green Gables*.

Discussion Guide

Part One: Orientation

In Amena Brown's prayer, she speaks of finding God in the butter grit of cornbread, the sound of jazz, the scent of baking bread. She tells of learning how to pray from her great-grandmother, who talked to God, and listened (p. 7-8). What sounds and smells and images come to mind when you think of prayer? How did you learn to pray? Was there someone who taught you to pray, either by instruction or example?

What is your prayer life like these days? How has it changed over the years? Winnie Varghese talks about her mother's sharing prayer requests with her via text and how nowadays she sends them out into the air over the Hudson River (p. 21). Do you share prayer requests with your family or friends? When someone asks you to pray for them, what do you do with this request? Do you wish you prayed for others in a different way?

In this first movement of the book, "orientation," we find prayers that reflect the variety of the feelings that come through in the Psalms. We hear prayers of longing, lament and confession, like that of Rev. Sandra Maria Van Opstal (pg. 29) and prayers of resistance and questioning, like that of Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort's prayer "This is How We'll Make It" (pg. 36). Which prayer in this first section did you find yourself most drawn toward? What is it about that particular prayer that drew you in?

At the beginning, the authors introduce different types of embodied prayer: a guided meditation and breath prayer (pg. 41), praying-as-soup-making (pg. 51), and breath prayers with scripture (p. 57). What was your experience of these tactile, embodied ways of praying? Do they inspired you to find new, simple ways of praying as you move throughout your day? Why do you think these were included in Part One of the book?

Part Two: Disorientation

Part two, "disorientation," offers a wide variety of challenging and prophetic prayers. Look back through this section of the book. Which prayer most challenged you or made you feel most uncomfortable?

Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes' prayer, "Prayer of a Weary Black Woman," received harsh feedback from readers when this collection was first published. Sarah Bessey, the editor, stood by Dr. Walker-Barnes and this challenging, prophetic prayer. Lisa Sharon Harper's "A Prayer for America" also addresses the complexities of racism and classism in the American Christian context. How did you wrestle with these prayers? Did this prayer challenge you, comfort you, or propel you into action? Can you think of prayers throughout Scripture that speak with the same intensity and longing for healing and change? (Hint: consider the prayers of the Old Testament prophets.)

Stephanie Tait's "A Liturgy for Disability" (pg. 78), and Laura Jean Truman's "A Prayer for the Tired, Angry Ones" both offer perspectives that we do not typically hear from our pulpits. Discuss these two prayers as a group. Why are they important? Whom do they represent? What would it be like to hear one of these prayers in corporate worship? How might your congregation be transformed by these prayers?

Practice: Experience the examen meditation written by Nish Weiseth, "Examen Your Politics," together as a group (pg. 95). Invite five participants to help facilitate this exercise; assign each of them one of the segments in bold font (gratitude, request, review, response, looking forward) to read. Remind them to read slowly, pausing between questions and lines, and leaving a full minute of silence before starting each new section. As participants are led through the exercise, they may choose to journal their responses and prayers in a notebook, or simply sit quietly to reflect. Open the time of prayer with Weiseth's words about St. Ignatius on page 96, and welcome everyone into silence to begin this time of prayer.

Part Three: Reorientation

In Kaitlin Curtice's prayer, "The Lantern and the Wild Flower," she imagines prayer as an adventure (pg. 109). Take a look at this prayer together. What line(s) do you find most compelling or resonant? How has your own experience of prayer been like an adventure to find and be found?

Consider Kelley Nikondeha's "Embodied Prayer" (pg. 129) and Sarah Bessey's "Instructions for an Evening of Your Life" (pg. 133). Did you try either of these practices as you read the book? If so, share what the experience was like. If not, share about what within you resisted this kind of embodied prayer.

A meme seen on Facebook recently has two images with words next to them. The first is a picture of a chalice filled with water with the word belief beside it. The second is an image of the ocean, and beside it the word faith. One is contained; the other is infinite. In Barbara Brown Taylor's prayer, "Approaching the Mountain in Prayer," she touches on the movement from belief (knowledge about God) to the infinite mystery of faith (communion with God). She says to God, "The longer I have known you, the more I have lost sight of you." Do you connect with Taylor's experience of prayer? Where do you find yourself in your own journey of faith and prayer these days? Are you looking at the mountain, standing at the foot of the mountain, or on the mountain itself?

Practice: In her introduction, Bessey suggests that the point of the book is not to give the reader prayers to pray, but to show the reader that we still get to pray. Prayer is still for us. "You still get to cry out to God, you still get to yell, weep, praise, and sit in the silence until you sink down into the love of God that has always been holding you, whether you knew it or not."

Spend your closing time together allowing participants to write their own prayers. Writing can be daunting, so assure the group that they do not have to share their prayers with anyone else unless they choose to. If you find it helpful to offer writing prompts, here are some suggestions:

- What words, phrases, or images from the book keep returning to you?
- What do you want to say to God these days, or what do you sense God is saying to you?
- What activities have become prayer for you—cooking, hiking, tucking your child into bed?
- Pick one of these questions and consider your response your prayer.

Benediction

Considering closing your time together with a portion of Sarah Bessey's benediction (p. 142), or another prayer from the collection.

Next Steps and Further Reading

Exploring Different Forms of Prayer

Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God by Sybil MacBeth
Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton and Thich Naht Hahn
Opening to God: Lecito Divina and Life as Prayer by David G. Brenner
Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer by Richard Rohr
Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church by Barbara A. Holmes

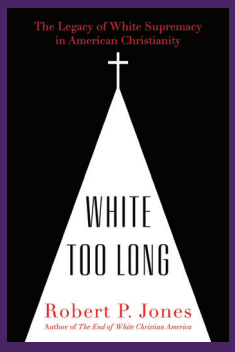
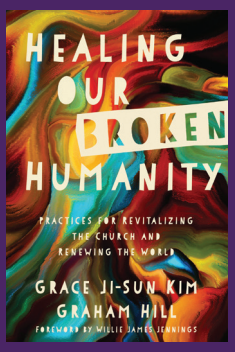
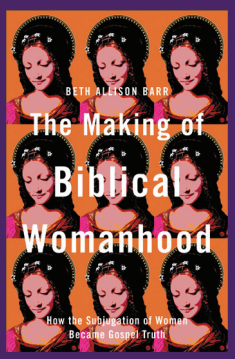
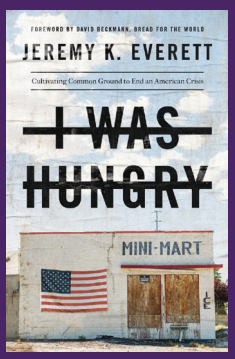
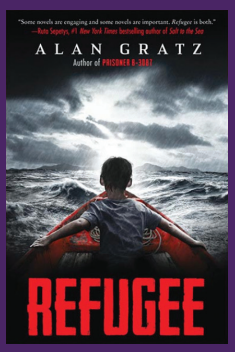
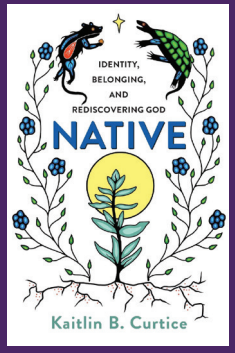
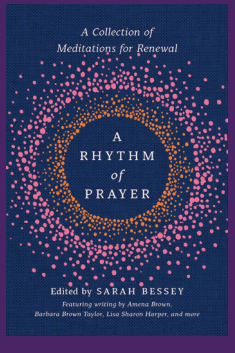
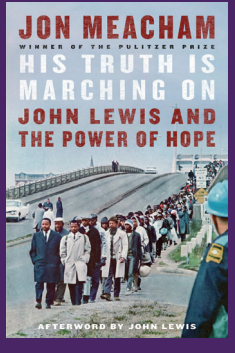
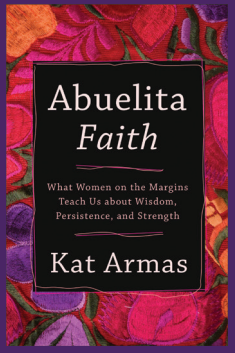
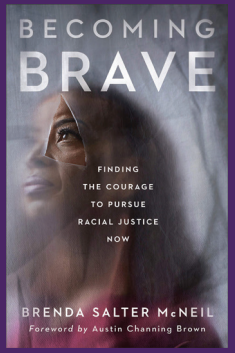
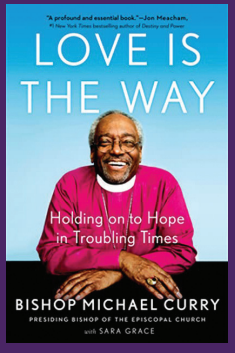
Prayer Books

Every Moment Holy: New Liturgies for Daily Life by Douglas McKelvey
Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals by Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove
The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief by Jan Richardson
Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community
Soul Weaving: A Gathering of Women's Prayers by Lyn Klug

Writings by the authors in A Rhythm of Prayer

https://www.youtube.com/user/menabee, Amena Brown's Spoken Word
An Altar in the World and *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor
I Bring the Voices of my People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation, Chanequa Walker-Barnes
Solus Jesus: A Theology of Resistance, Emily Swan
Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God, Kaitlin Curtice
laurajeantruman.com, writings by Laura Jean Truma
Found: A Story of Questions, Grace, and Everyday Prayer, Micha Bonette
Accidental Saints and *Pastrix*, Nadia Boltz Weber
Formation Northwest: *https://www.formationnorthwest.com/direction*, Nish Weiseth

CBF Book Club 2021-22

We're excited to announce selections for this year's book club. With new subjects, great authors, more comprehensive reading guides and Fellowship-wide virtual events. We invite you and your congregation, Sunday school class or small group to join us as we read and learn together.

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