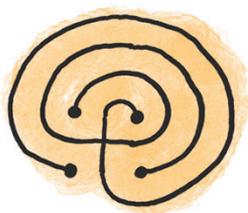


FAITHFUL FAMILIES at HOME

15 Easy Family-Friendly
Prayers and Activities



TRACI SMITH

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Introduction

Faith is learned as it is woven seamlessly into the fabric of daily life. I don't intend to ever sit down with my children and "teach" them about the importance of asking God for healing, but they will grow up with that belief as a part of their everyday experience.

This book offers practical ways for families to live their faith together through a variety of ceremonies, traditions, and spiritual practices. These ideas can be practiced from any Christian perspective. Though I am a Presbyterian minister, this book was not written from an exclusively Reformed Protestant perspective. Catholic, Evangelical, Quaker, Unitarian, and even families who do not have a home congregation will find useful ideas in this book.

For ease of use, the ideas in *Faithful Families at Home* are written like a script. Families can follow the script very closely or use it as a guide to create their own traditions, ceremonies, and spiritual practices.

—Traci Smith

Morning

Gratitude Cafe

One of my parishioners, a busy professional and mother of two, once told me, “In the morning, I take my coffee out to the porch and take a few minutes to reflect on everything I’m grateful for. This is how I find God and keep sane.” This tradition is a version of her tradition, adapted for family use. Gratitude has been proven, time and again, to be a value that increases health of all kinds: spiritual, mental, and physical. To take a moment and reflect on all of life’s many blessings, even once a week, is a worthwhile endeavor.

Designed for Ages 8+

Materials

1. A variety of morning beverages (tea, coffee, orange juice, hot chocolate)
2. Pencils and pens

Time Investment: 15–20 minutes

How To

1. Choose how often the family will hold the gratitude cafe. Weekly? Monthly? Daily? I suggest weekly, though some families will find this too frequent or infrequent for their needs.
2. On the morning of gratitude cafe, wake up early, make a special beverage for each family member, and gather someplace together. Outside can be a nice option, depending on space and weather conditions.
3. Say, *“There are so many things for which we can be thankful: the air we breathe, the home we live in, the clothes we wear. Let’s each*

take a moment and write down some of the things we are thankful for. Let's try to each write down five things, and then we will share them."

4. After a time of silent writing, say, *"Let's share the things we are thankful for with one another."*

5. Once everyone has shared, close by saying, *"God, we are thankful for all of these blessings, Amen."*

Notes

- Gratitude cafe is ideally practiced with some degree of regularity. Over time, family members will begin to anticipate the gratitude cafe moments and look forward to reporting specific things for which they are thankful. Try to incorporate it at regular intervals throughout your family's life.
- Saturday mornings are a great time for many families, as are Sunday evenings. If the cafe moment needs to be cancelled for some reason, make an effort to reschedule within a day or two.
- Some may need prompting for this activity, especially at first. Ask leading questions:

Are you thankful for any material blessings of this past week?

Thankful for anything special we have done as a family?

Thankful for any lessons you have learned?

Morning: Gratitude Cafe

- Parents and adults can model what it means to be thankful in all circumstances by highlighting the lessons they've learned from mistakes, or the hidden blessings in difficult circumstances.

Variations

- Have younger children draw pictures instead of writing.
- Encourage family members to hold individual gratitude cafes each day, and then compare notes at the end of the week.

Bedtime

Night Time Blessing

In addition to (or instead of) evening prayers, a bedtime blessing from parents is a wonderful tradition. Not only can it be done with children who are too young to speak, but it frees a busy child from the need to do or say anything. The blessing is simply received. It is a gift from the parent and an expression of the child being loved by God. Consider using the same blessing night after night so your child may begin to internalize and anticipate it.

Designed for Newborn through School Age

(As long as children are being tucked into bed by parents)

Time Investment: 30 seconds—1 minute

Materials: None

How To

1. At bedtime, after the child has finished his or her usual bedtime routine (teeth brushed, pajamas on, story read, etc.) say to your child, *“Daddy (or Mommy) is going to say a night time blessing now!”*
2. Place your hand on the child’s head or shoulder and say a short blessing. Use one of the examples or write your own.
 - i. *[Child’s name], may God bless you and keep you.
May God be kind and gracious to you.
May God give you peace tonight and every night. Amen.*¹
 - ii. *[Child’s name], may the peace of God, which is bigger than anything we understand, fill your heart and your mind, and may you know God’s love always. Amen.*²

Bedtime: Night Time Blessing

iii. [Child's name], may the God of hope fill you with joy and peace, not only tonight, but tomorrow and the next day and all the days of your life. Amen.³

iv. God Bless [child's name]. Amen.

3. At the end of the blessing, say, “Amen,” give the child a hug or kiss, and leave the room.

Notes

- The bedtime blessing can be shared by whichever parent or caregiver is putting the child to bed. The consistency in the blessing through a variety of different people provides a sense of security and safety to children.
- There is no age too small for this blessing. Begin to bless your children at bedtime from their very first day of life!

Variations

- Write the blessing or type it, and put it in a frame it over the child's bed.
- Allow older children to say a blessing to parents as well.
- Have a time of bedtime prayers and do the blessing at the end.

¹Adapted from Numbers 6:24–26.

²Adapted from Philippians 4:6.

³Inspired by Romans 15:13.

Sabbath

Celebrate a Mini-Sabbath

I heard a compelling sermon on Sabbath once that talked about Sabbath as a rhythm throughout life. Just as the Bible commands us to have one Sabbath day out of the week, there are also Sabbath *years* mentioned. The preacher encouraged us to think also the other way. *“Isn’t it possible to have Sabbath hours in our days, or Sabbath minutes in our hours?”* This simple idea has inspired me for years to focus on the concept of a “mini-Sabbath.” The idea is to train yourself and your family to take as little as one minute of time to rest and recharge. The mini-Sabbath ideas in this activity encourage mindfulness, which reduces stress and anxiety in adults and children alike.

Designed for Ages 5+

Materials

1. Notecards in two different colors (visit www.traci-smith.com/resources for a link to purchase printable notecards, or make your own using standard notecards by following the directions in the “how to” section)
2. Basket or box for the notecards

Time Investment: Initial investment of 30 minutes to make the notecards

How To

1. Make (or download from www.traci-smith.com/resources) Sabbath notecards. To make the notecards, use ten cards each of two different colors. One color will be for one-minute Sabbath ideas and the other color will be for five-minute Sabbath ideas.

2. Put the basket in a prominent location for use when a one- or five-minute Sabbath is called for.

3. When it's time for a one- or five-minute Sabbath, pull out an appropriate colored card and read it. Then set the timer for one or five minutes and do the activity listed.

One-Minute Sabbaths:

- Breathe in and out for one minute. As you breathe in, think to yourself, *“I am breathing in God’s love.”* As you breathe out, think, *“I am breathing out worry and fear.”*
- Go outside and notice what the weather is like. Is it hot on your skin, or cold? Is it raining or sunny? Notice what the day has to offer and what nature you see. If it is night, notice the moon and the stars.
- Write down (or say) three things you are grateful for.
- Read a psalm.
- Stretch as high as you can and then scrunch down as low as you can. Repeat for one minute.
- Take one minute to tidy up some space inside or outside. Notice how a tidier space helps you feel calmer.
- Close your eyes and think about a rainbow, a sunset, or other beautiful scene in nature.
- Focus on all of the sounds you can hear in thirty seconds. Jot them down, or talk about them with someone else.

Sabbath: Celebrate a Mini-Sabbath

- Jump up and down for 20–30 seconds. Notice your breathing and put your hand over your heart to feel your heartbeat.
- Squeeze hands into strong fists, then relax them. Repeat for one minute.

Five-Minute Sabbaths:

- Read a short poem. I find Mary Oliver, Ann Weems, and Madeleine L'Engle particularly inspiring.
- Close your eyes and listen to an inspiring piece of music.
- Sit in silence and drink a small glass of ice water. Don't do anything else.
- Do five minutes of yoga
- Write someone a thank you note or email.
- Try a finger labyrinth.
- Put some essential oils in an aromatherapy diffuser and sit in silence, noticing the smell.
- Take a five minute walk.
- Look out the window at birds or look at a fish tank

4. Notice how refreshed and recharged you feel! Return the card to the basket or box to come up again.

Notes

- In time, some of these activities may “rise to the top” and become favorites. Similarly, some might not work well for your family and will disappear from the rotation.
- Find times when your family is particularly prone to stress and anxiety and try to incorporate one of these activities in advance. Some families might like to keep the Sabbath ideas in the car.
- Visit www.traci-smith.com/resources for links to poems or musical pieces referenced in this activity.

Variations

- Add additional colors for different time periods (three minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes, one hour) and come up with your own activities for each that are well suited for your family.
- Instead of grabbing a Sabbath activity at random, pick a particular time of the day or week to do a Sabbath activity.
- Take the cards out of the basket after each Sabbath time until all have been chosen.

Anxiety

Wash Away Worries

Adults often look at the life of a child and think, “Children don’t have a job, a marriage, or dependents to take care of. They have no responsibility. They play and have their needs met. Ah, the easy life.” We are even quick to remind children, “Wait until you are in the real world, then you’ll know how hard it really is!” The truth is, though, children do live in the real world—their world. And a child is faced with any number of anxieties on a daily basis. This ceremony allows children to express their worries in the presence and safety of a caring adult and then have a moment to ceremonially “wash them away” and call on the Holy Spirit to carry them.

Designed for Ages 4+

Materials

1. Chalk
2. Bucket with sponges, or a garden hose
3. Sidewalk or driveway (see variations for options for apartment/condo dwellers)

Time Investment: 10–30 minutes

How To

1. When your child or teen comes to you with concern or worries, ask if he or she would like to do an exercise with you in which you “wash your worries away together.” If the child says yes, grab your chalk and head outside!
2. Tell your child that you’ll take some time to draw (or write) your worries out on the driveway together. It’s important that the adult do this activity with the child so that the child doesn’t feel singled out because of her worry. Tell your child that at the end she will

have the opportunity to explain her drawing or words, but that she doesn't have to if she doesn't want to.

3. At the end of the drawing time, ask your child to explain his drawing or worry if he would like. Model this by sharing some of your worries.

4. Together, fill a bucket with water and find sponges, or get out the garden hose.

5. Wash away your chalk drawings with the sponges or the garden hose. As you do, say, *“Holy Spirit, we give you our worries and fears. Take them away.”*

6. Conclude with a hug and a prayer:

“Holy Spirit, we have a lot of worry and anxiety. Help us to have peace and calm in our hearts. Amen.”

Notes

- I advise adults to share some, but not all, of their concerns to model to children how to be both public and private in their sharing of concerns. There are times when we want to share our worries with others, and there are times when we'd rather keep them private. Modeling that God hears all of our anxieties, even the unspoken ones, is a great relief for children.
- There is a strong temptation in this exercise for parents to either suggest solutions to these problems or to minimize the problems. Both of these instincts are born out of the desire to be genuinely helpful to the child. I encourage parents to resist the urge to do this. Perhaps during the activity you will think of some solutions you

would like to present to your child at a different time. One way to approach this is to do the activity as written, then later say, “*You know, I was thinking about when we washed away our worries, and I had some ideas. Would you like to hear them?*” If the child says yes, offer your suggestions gently. If she says no, respect her desire to work through the problem herself. Certainly, there are exceptions to this, worries in which parents must get involved for the safety and protection of their children. However, consider doing the follow up after the washing away ceremony to allow the activity to stand alone as an exercise in quiet meditation.

- Adolescence is a time when worries abound! Don’t be so quick to assume your teenager doesn’t want to do an activity like this. During the teen years it is especially important to allow for symbolic drawings that might be worries “in code,” and to not press your teen to divulge every detail to you. Follow up can happen in gentle ways as well: “I was wondering about that drawing from earlier. How’s that all going?”

Variations

- Try this activity with personal chalkboards, a dry erase board, or even a pencil and eraser.
- Write down the worries and paint over them.

After a Natural Disaster

Butterfly Hug

The butterfly hug is a calming technique created by therapist Luciana Artigas after Hurricane Pauline struck Mexico in 1997. It's a simple technique that can help children (and adults) relax and find peace. I learned about it when I was struggling to manage my own anxiety and panic attacks and have found it to be a useful tool for my children to find focus and rest. In researching this technique, I learned that Ms. Artigas developed this technique after one of the young children she was counseling asked, "Who will embrace me after you are gone?" Determined to come up with a way for children to feel accompanied in their trauma, Ms. Artigas and her husband developed the butterfly hug. The butterfly hug is a great reminder to children that there is nowhere we can go God is not with us. With practice, children can learn to practice the butterfly hug without the aid of a parent or guide.

Designed for Ages 5+

Materials

None

Time Investment: Varies

How To

1. Say, *"The psalmist says this about God, 'Suppose I had wings like the dawning day and flew across the ocean. Even then God's powerful arm would guide and protect me. Or suppose I said, 'I'll hide in the dark until night comes to cover me over.' But you see in the dark because daylight and dark are all the same to you.' [Psalm 139:9–12 CEV] This passage reminds us that God is always with us, in darkness and in light. Let's ask God to be near to us and to help us find calm and focus."* Guide your children through steps 2–8.

2. Sit or lie in a relaxed position.
3. Take a couple of deep breaths to begin to calm down and relax.
4. Cross your arms across your chest so that your fingertips rest just under your collar bone. Fingers should point more toward the top of the head, rather than the side of the body. Thumbs can interlock, or not, depending on what is most comfortable.
5. Gently close eyes, or softly focus ahead.
6. Alternate tapping fingers, left and right, at whatever speed feels most comfortable.
7. Continue to breathe deeply while tapping, left and right. Keep tapping for at least three minutes.
8. Either end the butterfly hug naturally (when the children feel calm and ready) or by saying *“Thank you, God, for peace. Help us to feel peace whenever we feel worried or unsafe.”*

Notes

- Though this practice is listed as a ceremony for after a natural disaster, it can also be used as a spiritual practice for children who struggle with rest and worry. Remember that it takes patience and practice.
- Also, this practice works well with the Bedtime: Night Time Blessing in chapter 1. Practice the butterfly hug for a few minutes, and then say a blessing for children.

After a Natural Disaster: Butterfly Hug

Variations

- Take turns leading the Butterfly Hug.
- Sing a song and tap the wings of the butterfly in tune with the song. Singing is a great way to control breath and reduce stress.

Photo Prayers

It's hard to pray with a very young child or infant. This photo prayer is a way to engage babies and toddlers who are learning to connect people and faces. It also sets up a routine for praying for others that can develop into more advanced prayers.

Designed for Babies and Younger Toddlers

Materials

Photos of important family members and pets

Time Investment: 1–5 minutes, plus 10–30 minute preparation

How To

1. Print photos of family members and other significant people in the family's life. Choose photos in which faces are large and prominent.
2. Place the photos near a chair where you can sit just before bedtime.

For the Practice

1. After the child is dressed and ready for bed, sit with the photos and hold the child on your lap. Show the child each picture and say, “*God Bless [name]*” (“*God Bless Grandma,*” “*God Bless Angie,*” “*God Bless Papa,*” etc.).
2. As the child's age and speaking ability develops, have the child point to the photo, repeat the name, or say the blessing with you.
3. After the final picture say, “*Amen.*”

Notes

- This exercise is effective in its simplicity. Over time, even a very young child notices the routine of sitting down, looking at the photos, and saying the names. Resist the temptation to say more than the simple blessing.
- Keep the exercise sacred by looking at this particular set of photos only at prayer time.

Variations

- Instead of sitting in a chair with printed photos, walk around the house and touch photos that are hanging in frames or displayed on tables. As you walk by each photo, touch it and say, “*God Bless [name].*” The final destination is the child’s bed, and you can end by placing the child in bed, saying a blessing, and adding “*Amen.*”
- Add other drawings or pictures and use phrases such as “God Bless The World” or “God Bless all the animals in the land and the fish in the sea.”
- Add another sacred element, such as a special blanket or shawl to cover the child only during this prayer time, or turning on a battery-operated candle before you sit down.

Prayer Basket

In many churches and faith communities around the world, people bring their prayer requests to God via baskets or boxes or offering plates. Little slips of paper with people's deepest needs and requests are placed lovingly into these different vessels with the confidence and hope that they will be read and the requests lifted up to God. Why not have a family prayer basket with the same function? Those who visit your family can also be invited to contribute their requests as well.

Designed for Ages 3+

Materials

1. Small basket
2. Slips of paper
3. Pencils, pens, or crayons

Time Investment: Varies

How To

1. Place a basket in a prominent location in your home with slips of paper and pens or pencils beside it.
2. Label the basket "Prayers" or "We Pray for Each Other."
3. Leave the basket without comment for a while. As children and others ask about it, you can say, *"This is our prayer basket for now, or from now on if we like it. Anytime someone has a need they would like other people to pray for, they will write it down or draw a picture of it. Anytime someone wants to pray for others, they can go over to the basket, read what is inside, and pray about it."*

4. Clear the basket out periodically.

Notes

- It is very important to check the basket regularly. Be sure to designate an adult or responsible older child to check the basket regularly in case there is an urgent request that a family member would like to make using these means.
- The prayer basket need not be a permanent fixture in your home. Try having it available for a season or defined period of time.
- Invite family members to leave the prayer slips in the basket so everyone has the opportunity to read the requests.
- In my ministry as a pastor, it's always hard for me to throw away written requests. I prefer to burn them and to imagine that the requests are going back up to God one last time. While this is an optional practice, I advise against tossing the old prayer requests in the trash. The symbolism there, especially for sensitive children, is too much to bear. Recycling them, saving them, or burning them are alternatives.

Variations

- Instead of blank pieces of paper, make a fill-in-the-blank card that can be duplicated. The card might say, "*Today I am thankful for _____*" or, "*Today I would like to pray for _____.*" Include a space for the person making the request to sign it.
- Younger children can draw pictures of the things they would like others to pray for.
- Decorate the basket as a family.

Prayer Walk

When I ask adults in my congregation when they feel the presence of God most clearly, I often hear things such as “while hiking,” or “when the sun sets,” or “in nature.” So often when we consider the wonders of God, we see evidence of God’s creative power in snowfall, or rain, or wind. This prayer practice involves walking in nature and noticing the marvels of God’s creation.

Designed for Ages 5+

Materials

(All of these materials are optional)

1. Paper bag, basket, or other container for collecting interesting things
2. Magnifying glass
3. Binoculars
4. Camera
5. Sketch pad and pencil or crayons
6. Any materials that you need on a hike (sunscreen, bug spray, sunglasses, lunch, etc.)

Time Investment: 30 minutes—2 hours or more

How To

1. Pick a day and location appropriate for a walk or hike outside.
2. Prepare for your walk and take with you items that are relevant for your context and weather conditions.

Prayer Walk

3. Introduce the idea of a prayer walk to your family by saying, *“We are going to go for a walk now to think about all of the special ways that we can see the work of God in the world around us.”*
4. Choose a way your family might decide to identify how you see God on your walk. Some options:
 - a. Collect items along the way that seem meaningful and put them in a bag or basket (if appropriate; many parks and nature reserves don’t allow the removal of any living things, so only take things such as leaves already lying on the ground, etc.).
 - b. Encourage everyone to take photos of places where there is evidence of God’s work.
 - c. Draw sketches.
 - d. Write poems.
5. After the walk, gather together to share what you have learned by sharing your photos, drawings, and/or paintings.

Notes

- Consider doing this prayer walk, not only on a sunny or pleasant day, but also on days that are rainy, “too hot,” “too cold,” or otherwise not ideal. These imperfect days offer a rich opportunity to see evidence of God’s work in ways that might not be apparent on other days.
- This activity will vary greatly depending on the interests and activities of family members. Consider allowing each family member to pick out the ways that he or she sees God’s work. One person might photograph, while another collects things, and yet another sketches.

Variations

- Do this prayer walk inside at a unique location: a mall, church, etc. Take the same walk and travel the same route over a period of time (one time per month for a year, for example), and compare how observations change over time.
- Travel to a special location for the purpose of this practice. Try different national parks, or local parks and trails.

Candle Prayers

In my first years as a minister, I was often overwhelmed with the privilege and responsibility of praying for other people. I shared my feelings with a spiritual director and said, “I worry I am forgetting someone who is counting on me to pray for them!” She nodded sympathetically and then taught me this simple practice. “Light a candle,” she said, “and as it burns, you can watch the light radiate and the small bit of smoke rise up, and you will know that all of your prayers, the spoken and unspoken ones, go up to God.” I never forgot that advice, and candle prayers are an important part of my own faith journey. This spiritual practice is very simple, and easy to explain to a child.

Designed for Ages 8+

Materials

Candle and matches, or battery-operated candle

Time Investment: 30 seconds—2 minutes

How To

1. Parent and child (or the whole family) gather in a dim or dark room and light a candle.
2. Say, *“This candle burning is our prayer. Just as the light fills up the dark room, we know that our prayers are lifted up to God. Let’s sit here for a minute and watch the candle and know that our prayers are known by God, even if we don’t know what we want to say or how to say it.”*

3. At the end of a minute or so say, *“Now we are going to end our candle prayer. I will blow out the candle and we will all say ‘Amen.’ We will know that God heard our prayer.”*

Notes

- Use battery-operated candles for homes in which little ones or pets are likely to run around and bump into them.

Variations

- Instead of blowing the candle out, let it burn in some visible part of the house for many hours. Remind the family that it is a visible sign of God’s presence.
- Make the candle prayer specific. When someone has a special need, say, *“Let’s light a candle and know that God hears our prayers. Tonight we light a candle for [name].”*

Smartphone Prayers

When I was in the beginning stages of promoting the first edition of this book, I had the opportunity to present the ideas in the book at the *Faith Forward* conference, an annual conference for imaginative and creative children’s and youth ministry leaders. If you ever have the chance to attend, I highly recommend it. At that conference I learned a version of this very special prayer from Lilly Lewin, who calls herself a curator of “free range worship.” The thing I love most about this practice is how it uses the smartphone as a tool to bring focus to the prayer rather than seeing it as a distraction. I often hear parents ask, “*How can I get my teen off of his/her phone?*” This practice teaches how to use technology in service of spiritual practice rather than against it.

Designed for Ages 10+

Materials

Smartphone with at least 15 minutes of battery life remaining (preferably one smartphone per participant)

Time Investment:

5–10 minutes

How To

1. For this practice, one family member will act as the leader, and others will be participants. Rotate who serves as the leader in order to give everyone a chance to participate in the prayer.

2. The leader will call everyone together and explain the Smartphone Prayer. Say, “*This prayer moves through five different activities on our smartphones. Each is one minute long. I will tell you what to do*

for each activity and then start my timer. When the timer rings, look up at me and listen for the next mission.”

3. Go through the five missions as follows, making sure the leader sets his/her timer after each instruction and calls everyone back together before presenting the next mission:

- Minute One: *Go to your text messages and take a look at the last five people in the recent messages, whether they are people you text regularly or people you don't know at all. Take this minute to pray for each of the five people listed there.*
- Minute Two: *Go to a news app or website and take a minute to scroll through the headlines. Pray for what jumps out at you as a prayer need this day.*
- Minute Three: *Go to the notepad and spend this minute typing out whatever comes to mind: praise, gratitude, confession, or requests to God.*
- Minute Four: *Go to your favorite social media site and spend this minute praying for the people who come up on your feed during this minute.*
- Minute Five: *Go to your photos. Take this moment to scroll through the most recent twenty or so photos. What prayers come to mind? Lift them up to God now.*

4. Follow up: After the five-minute prayer is over, take a couple of minutes to talk about the activity together using one or more of the following questions:

- *Was there anything surprising or unusual that you heard from God when you were using your cell phone to pray today?*
- *What was the most important prayer that came through today?*
- *How can we incorporate this attitude of prayer as we use our smartphones throughout the week?*
- *In your opinion, does technology draw us closer to God or farther away? Talk a little about your opinion.*

Notes

- Though this practice aims to use technology as a tool for fostering and encouraging spiritual practice, I still strongly encourage the practice of turning off or unplugging from electronic devices. All of the practices in *Faithful Families* can be enhanced by putting technology away while the practices are enjoyed. Certain practices are particularly suited for putting technology away.
- For more fantastic and creative prayer and spiritual practice, visit Lilly Lewin on the web at www.freerangeworship.com.
- For other ways to use smartphones to build community through a prayer service for youth groups or families who are far away from one another, visit www.traci-smith.com/resources.

Variations

- This practice is well suited to become an “add on” practice to other practices in *Faithful Families* or a part of a daily family or individual

Smartphone Prayers

routine. Try running through the Smartphone Prayer for five minutes before dinner, and then putting phones away for the remainder of dinner. For another variation, start the day with the prayer as a reminder to not let the phone dictate the day.

- Instead of using one phone per person, use one phone per family.
- Add different elements to the prayer that incorporate other often used apps on your smartphone.

Bodily Prayers

Christianity is rich with traditions that involve the body: from pilgrimages to chants to the sign of the cross, the body is used in different ways. Yet, for most children, “Fold your hands and bow your head,” is the only instruction given with regard to a prayer posture. There are many prayer positions seen in the Bible and elsewhere: kneeling, lying flat on the ground, lying with one’s forehead to the ground, praying with hands to the sky. Children are naturally drawn to a variety of different postures and are often quite receptive to experimenting with their bodies in prayer. This activity is playful, and it allows children to experiment with different ways of talking to God.

Designed for Ages 2–8

Materials: None

Time Investment: 5 minutes

How To

1. Tell children, *“Sometimes when we pray, we are quiet with our heads bowed and our fingers clasped, but, sometimes, we can pray while we move around. We can reach to the sky or curl in a tiny ball or kneel or lay flat on the ground.”*
2. Say, *“Let’s practice it! Who has a prayer?”*
3. Ask children for a short (one sentence) prayer. (Example: “I pray grandma is better,” or, “Thank you, God, for this day.”)

4. Take the suggestions and practice praying in a variety of postures: first “traditionally,” then reaching up to the sky, then curled in a tiny ball, then lying flat on the ground.

5. Ask, “*Which did you like the best?*” and, “*Which did you like the least?*”

6. Repeat with each person’s prayers.

Notes

- Be prepared with a few prayer suggestions in case a child doesn’t have one.
- Allow children to laugh and smile and be silly during these moving prayers. God loves and accepts them for who they are as children, and prayer isn’t always a solemn occasion.

Variations

- Instead of going through all of the postures for each prayer, pick one of the postures and try everyone’s prayer in that way, changing the posture each day. (For example, use the traditional way on Monday, reaching to the sky on Tuesday, etc.)
- Allow children to make up their own prayer postures (for example, skipping, standing on one leg, etc.).
- Invite children to invent prayer postures for a familiar prayer such as the Lord’s Prayer.

The Labyrinth

Labyrinths are maze-like structures that have their roots in ancient mythology. Christians have used them for centuries as a way to center themselves, look inward, and meditate. In English we often use the words “labyrinth” and “maze” interchangeably. The significant difference between a maze and labyrinth, however, is that a maze has multiple and confusing routes with many dead ends, whereas a labyrinth has only one path to follow the whole way through. Part of the experience of walking a labyrinth is trusting in this truth. Though the traveller can’t see the end, he has to trust that he won’t get lost. In this version of the spiritual practice, family members make their own finger labyrinths on paper plates and use them for meditation and reflection.

Designed for Ages 6+

Materials

1. Paper plates with a flat surface area and raised edge
2. Pencils
3. Puffy paint
4. Labyrinth template

Time Investment

To make the labyrinth: 10 minutes plus drying time; to do the labyrinth practice itself: 1 to 10+ minutes, depending on the child’s age and attention span

How To

Each Person Makes a Labyrinth

In pencil, draw the outline of the labyrinth on the paper plate. Use the example on the next page as a guide.



1. Trace over the pencil outline with puffy paint, using either a continuous long line or dots. Be sure to use a fairly thick layer of paint so there will be a raised edge.
2. Allow the paint to dry overnight or longer.

Practice the Labyrinth

1. Explain that the idea of the labyrinth is to journey to the center and then out again as slowly and meditatively as possible. There is nothing specific to think about. Try to be open to the experience.
2. Demonstrate how to use your finger to move along the raised path. The labyrinth journey can be taken with eyes open or eyes closed.

3. Set apart some time for each person to take a journey to the center of the labyrinth and back out again. Remember to emphasize that the journey is to be taken slowly. Challenge children to move their fingers as slowly as they can without stopping.

4. After the experience, come back together and talk for a brief time about the experience. Ask:

- *Was it hard or easy to go slowly?*
- *What did you think about the experience?*
- *Would you like to do it again sometime?*

Note

- Some families will want to journey through their labyrinths at the same time, and in the same room, while others will prefer to send each person to their own place in the home for the practice. Experiment with both options and decide which is better for your family.

Variations

- If this activity is well received in your family, try packing the finger labyrinths with you on a vacation so you can journey through them in a special location, or take a special trip with the labyrinth journey in mind.
- Use the website www.labyrinthlocator.com to find a walkable labyrinth to travel together.
- Try this with black paper plates and glow-in-the-dark puffy paint, and use it at night or in the dark.

Imagination

Star Pictures

Imagination and faith go hand in hand. The Bible says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”⁴ As we cultivate a life of faith, we must rely on our imaginations. We envision a better world and we imagine what God is like. We must be imaginative to see things from another’s perspective. Most children are gifted imaginers; we as adults need only to tune in to what is already there. This activity allows families to imagine together, and it uses stars as a starting place.

Designed for All Ages

Materials

All of these materials, except for the starry sky, are optional and will vary depending on your location and season.

1. Starry night sky (see note)
2. Blankets or sheets
3. Refreshments (hot chocolate, lemonade, etc.)
4. Bug spray
5. Flashlights

Time Investment: 15 minutes to an hour or more

How To

1. On a clear, comfortable night with a lot of stars visible, gather everyone together for a nighttime imagination star party.
2. Start the activity by saying, “*There is a verse in the Bible that says, [God] determines the number of stars /and calls them each by name.*”¹⁵ *Isn’t it amazing to think about how all of these stars were created by God? God must be so big and creative to put all of these stars in the sky.”*

3. Lie down on blankets under the stars and invite everyone to look at the stars and talk about what pictures they can find in the stars.

4. After a time of finding star pictures, close with a prayer:

“God who created the stars in the sky, thank you for giving us time to use our imaginations to see pictures in the sky. Bless us and help us to have a good night. Amen.”

Notes

- This activity is closely tied to one’s environment. For those who live in urban areas where light pollution makes it difficult (or impossible) to see stars, try the first variation below.
- Nonverbal toddlers and babies can sit outside and enjoy the night air for this activity, even if they can’t yet participate in the star finding activity.

Variations

- For some, this activity must wait until vacation or a time when there are stars visible in a location other than home. If this is too rare an occurrence in your family, you can recreate your own starry sky with a little preparation. Find an extra-large piece of black butcher paper and randomly place white dots on it with white paint. Don’t worry about putting them in any pattern—put some close together and some spread out. Hang the paper from the ceiling in a room and lie on the floor under low light. Do the activity as described under your “starry sky.”

- Try this same activity with clouds. Use this Bible verse to begin:

“Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind.” You can say, “Even though there is no rainbow in the sky, we still see lots of clouds. God made the clouds and the sky and everything in it.”⁶

⁴Hebrews 11:1, NRSV.

⁵Psalms 147:4, (NIV).

⁶Genesis 9:14–15a, (NIV).

Meditation

Make Quiet Time Bags

Now more than ever, it's important for children and adults to take time for inner peace and meditation. This time can be used to listen to God, clear one's mind, and let go of the day's worries and cares. Often with meditation, we think of sitting still and silent. Since this doesn't work for many children, everyday activities can bring opportunities to meditate on hearing God's voice. When done intentionally, even something like putting together a puzzle is a chance to quiet oneself and listen for God's voice. In this exercise, each family member makes a "quiet time bag" to be used for personal meditation. Later, the family spends time together, each person working on the activities he or she has chosen. In this way, the family is encouraged to take some time to unplug, quiet themselves, and be still.

Designed for ages 3+

Materials

1. A special bag for each member of the family
2. Materials that each family member enjoys, and which contribute to his or her sense of inner peace, quiet, and calm. This will vary for each family member depending on personal interests and age. Some examples: knitting or crochet, an inspiring book (with either words or pictures), art supplies, a simple quiet game (nothing with an on/off switch!), blocks, etc.

Time Investment

30 minutes to prepare the bags, 15 minutes—1 hour for quiet time

How To:

Prepare the Quiet Time Bags

1. Explain to family members that, from time to time, your family will be observing quiet time. During this time, each family member

Meditation: Make Quiet Time Bags

will be engaged in the activities found in the quiet time bag. During quiet time it will not be permitted to watch TV or use any other electronics.

2. Hand out bags to older children and allow them to select their own activities for their bags. Provide guidance and suggestions for what might go in the bags. Assemble bags with (or for) very young children.

3. Store the bags until it is time to use them.

For Quiet Time

1. Choose a time for the practice. Enforce an electronics-free rule and quiet ambiance.

2. Distribute the quiet time bags to each family member and allow each person to go his or her own way for the time allotted.

3. Gather together at the end of quiet time to collect the bags and talk about the experience. *What did you do? Did you enjoy your quiet time? Was it easy or hard to enjoy your rest?*

Notes

- Once bags are assembled, families can experiment with different lengths of quiet time or different quiet time routines.
- Part of the appeal of quiet time is its novelty. Help family members put something in the bags that will only be used at quiet time so that quiet time becomes something to look forward to.

Meditation: Make Quiet Time Bags

Variations

- Instead of assembling one's own bag, have one family member assemble them for the rest of the family as a surprise. Alternate who makes the bags and experiment with each family member's suggestions.
- Create one bag the whole family grabs from.

Waiting

Water, Air, and Sky

Waiting is hard, for children and adults alike. Sometimes we wait for small things like the bus or our turn in line. Sometimes we are waiting for something that happens slowly and gradually, almost imperceptibly, like water evaporating from a glass. Throughout life we must wait. We wait for healing or for our dreams to become reality; we even wait to understand our faith. This activity is a visual reminder that many of the things we hope for in life come slowly.

Designed for Ages 8+

Materials

1. Pitcher with 8 ounces of water
2. Empty glass

Time Investment: 5 minutes of active time, up to a month or more of waiting

How To

1. Someone reads aloud Romans 8:25, which says, *“If we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently”* (NIV). The reader asks two questions:

(1) “What does it feel like to wait a long time for something?” and (2) “What is something you are waiting for now?”

2. After the questions, say, *“We are going to start an activity now about waiting, and it will take a very long time. Each of us is going to pour a little bit of this water into this glass, and then we will put the glass somewhere we can check on it every day. We will wait to see how long the water stays in the glass and how long it takes to evaporate. As we pass by and see how long it is taking, we might feel*

discouraged or wonder if it is ever going to happen, but slowly, very slowly, all of the water will evaporate. The water becomes part of the air, but it is such a slow process we hardly notice it.”

3. Take turns pouring the water into the glass, and decide where to put it in your house. Choose a place where people will pass by it regularly but will not disturb it.

4. Walk by the glass on a regular basis and take note of how the water is evaporating. Comment with family members on the progress from time to time. When the water has finally evaporated completely, schedule a time the family will come back together for a discussion.

5. Read the Bible verse together again:

“If we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”

Ask: (1) *“How did it feel to wait for the water to evaporate?”* Give prompts if nobody comes up with a reaction. *“Was it boring? Did you feel like it was happening so slowly you could hardly see it? Was it exciting to imagine that the day would finally be here?”* and (2) *“What are some things that we wait for that take a very long time?”* Some ideas for this question include healing, a new baby, perfecting a skill, etc.

6. Close with a prayer:

“Thank you, God, for this lesson about waiting. Help us to remember that you are with us, even when waiting for something important that takes a long time. Amen.”

Notes

- It takes a very long time for 8 ounces of water to evaporate from a glass. Though there are variables that change the amount of time it will take, you can plan on anywhere from two weeks to a month, on average. Although many things affect the rate of evaporation, two main things will accelerate or slow down the process: (1) the surface area—the wider the glass, the quicker evaporation will happen; (2) the temperature—the colder the ambient temperature, the slower the evaporation.
- Some children will be drawn to this activity and check on the water daily, or even more frequently, to see its progress. Others might be tempted to ignore it. The empty glass might remain empty for a long time before some remember the activity at all. When someone finally notices, call everyone together for the discussion questions.

Variations

- Color the water with food coloring to make it even more noticeable (and less likely the water will be thrown away!).
- Label the glass “the waiting glass,” or something similar.
- Try syncing the water evaporation with a key event in your family’s life. See which happens first, the evaporation of all the water or the event you are waiting for (birth of a new baby, for example).

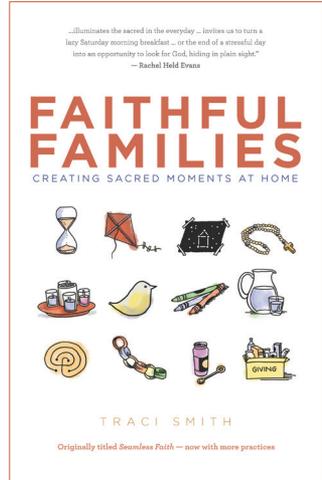


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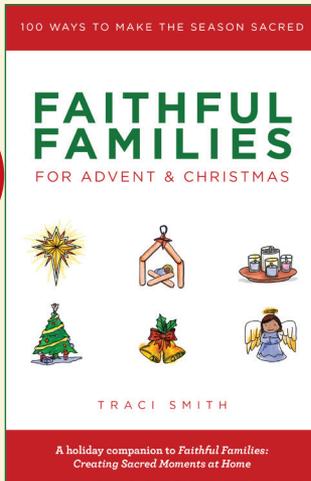
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