

Rituals and Faith Practices



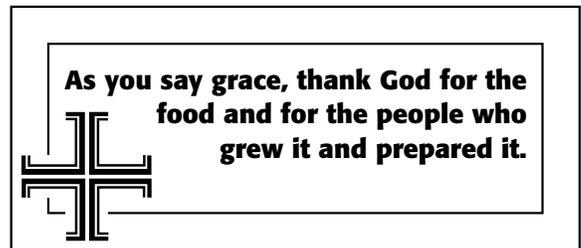
Gathering In (10 minutes)

Welcome people, provide treats, and give people a few minutes to catch up and get settled. (More specific suggestions for how this can be facilitated appear in the Introduction to the Leader Guide.)

Theme

You may want to either read this or paraphrase the theme and purpose before posing the opening question.

Rituals play a prominent role throughout our lives. Singing “Happy Birthday” marks the passing of time. Graduation rituals mark the end of a course of study and the possibilities of new opportunities. Sporting events provide some of the most ritualistic occasions in our culture—from the symbolic “first pitch” on Opening Day of the baseball season to the office pools that surround the Sweet Sixteen and Final Four of college basketball. Each of us has daily rituals, such as brushing our teeth or taking a walk after supper. Our community of faith promotes meaningful rituals like Baptism, the Rite of Confirmation, and the Celebration of Life at a funeral service. Some people have developed rituals around daily faith practices, such as praying, reading the Bible, or regularly attending Sunday worship.



The purpose of this session is to explore some of the rituals and practices that help us remember that we belong to God. What are some of our “rituals” of everyday life? What faith practices have others found to be helpful in keeping their faith “front and center” in their lives? How can we develop faith practices and rituals that will nourish us as we seek to live more faithfully? What faith practices used by other faith traditions might be helpful in shaping our own rituals and faith practices? How do we create rituals out of ordinary daily happenings?

As the group moves through the session, encourage members to explore on a deeper level what this means for their faith walks.

Opening Question (10 – 15 minutes)

Use one or a combination of questions to open.

- Tell about a favorite food. Is the food eaten only on special occasions, or can you serve it on “ordinary” days to make them special?
- Tell about your favorite current or past holiday tradition. What is it about that tradition that makes it so special?
- What are some rituals that you have developed around activities that you like to do, such as camping, traveling, golfing, running, etc.?
- If you were to choose one item to remind you of God, what would it be?

Opening Prayer (1 – 2 minutes)

Read the following prayer.

Christ our brother, as we follow your command to remember you in the bread and the wine in Holy Communion, we participate in a life-giving ritual of our faith. Your example of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and throughout your life on earth reminds us that you draw us close to you as we pray. Thank you for giving us these tangible signs of your presence among us. We are so grateful that you desire our presence in worship, that you reveal yourself to us through scripture, that you hear us when we pray, and that you continue to speak to us in so many ways. Lord, we want to incorporate you into the fabric of our daily lives so that we feel your presence always. You are the one true and living God. Amen.

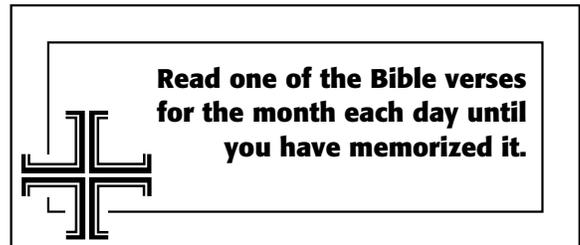
What does the Bible say? (20 minutes)

Read the following passage together or ask members of the group to read the passage while the other group members follow along.

Briefly introduce the reading, "Elijah was one of the 'Super' prophets that God sent to the Israelites during the reign of King Ahab, a particularly evil king of Israel. Ahab's wife, Queen Jezebel, wanted to kill Elijah because of his prophecies concerning the downfall of Israel. As Elijah hid from Ahab's men, God spoke to him in a way that was as surprising to Elijah as it is to us."

1 Kings 19:9-13

⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."



¹¹He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Briefly introduce the reading, "Some rituals are prescribed by God to help us remember what God has done for us. The Lord's Supper is one such ritual. In this story, we see how God instructed the Israelites to prepare to leave Egypt and commands them never to forget this event in the life of God's people, but to keep the observance even after the danger has passed."



Exodus 12:14, 21-27

¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

²¹Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. ²²Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. ²³For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. ²⁴You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children.

²⁵When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance.

²⁶And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' ²⁷you shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed down and worshiped.

Think About...

Provide a lead-in to the discussion, like "Before we look at what others have to say about these verses, let's take a few minutes to talk about our own interpretation."

- What do you learn from Elijah's encounter with God? How might this help you as you plan your own time of prayer and meditation? (1 Kings 19)
- When has God come to you in the silence of your own heart? How did you know that it was God speaking to you? (1 Kings 19)
- Through a festival, God commanded the Israelites to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and that God freed them. In what ways does remembrance play a role in your faith life? Do Christians have any similar commands to remember what God has done for us? What are they? Why are they meaningful for us? (Exodus 12)
- If you were to celebrate a festival day, which day would it be? What would the day include?

What do others say? (40 minutes)

Read the following reflections together or ask members of the group to read a paragraph while the other group members follow along.

Last summer, almost immediately after I arrived in Tanzania, my cell phone started ringing. Each call was a request that I come to the caller's home for tea, alone. Although I had never experienced this type of invitation before, I know enough about Tanzanian culture to realize that it would be extremely impolite to refuse these invitations. Grudgingly I sandwiched these visits in when the group was doing things that did not require my presence. When I arrived at the first home, I was draped in a kanga (a colorful piece of African cloth) and the family gathered around me and escorted me to a chair of honor. After I sat down, I was invited to drink a cup of tea and talk about my parents, both of whom had died within the past 6 months. Then the family surrounded me again. They cried and prayed, hugged me and sent me on my way, kanga and all. Peter, our faithful bus driver, explained that this ceremony is normally conducted for friends when they lose a relative through death. As this ritual was played out over and over, I became more comfortable accepting the tears of my friends and more importantly, I felt loved and gathered into the community in a way that transcended the ordinariness of the time and place and became sacred.



There doesn't seem to be a lot of room for ritual in our post-modern culture. We often associate rituals with religious practices or sacraments such as baptism or Holy Communion. Ceremonies that mark passages in our lives like marriage or graduations also have a ritualistic feel. Rituals seem like an invitation to slow down and stop for a while. It's difficult to appreciate rituals if we don't make time for them. Since that summer in Tanzania, I have come to understand rituals as special ways of connecting with others, with God, and with myself. They don't have to be elaborate, but they are important because they allow us to experience seemingly normal activities as sacred.

Have you ever thought of your invitation to someone to share a meal as a sacred time that allows you to develop a deeper connection with those around the table? Table fellowship is one of the oldest rituals of the secular world and of the church. There is something holy about sitting around a table, sharing a meal that nourishes our bodies and sharing conversation that nourishes our relationship with those present. Just thinking about the meal and the conversation in these terms opens up the possibility to see these times as sacred opportunities to celebrate hospitality and the gift of friendship.

Setting aside a few minutes of the day for prayer connects us to God in surprising ways. Although books on spiritual practices discuss various ways to transform prayer time into a ritual, by setting up a designated prayer space or an altar in the home, all that's really necessary is a willing heart and a desire to communicate with the One who created us and loves us beyond anything we can understand. Setting aside ten minutes, during a specific time of the day, is a good way to develop the practice of prayer; however some people find it more helpful to pray during certain daily activities like taking a shower, grocery shopping, or waiting in line. Deciding to pray during an ordinary time of the day makes it sacred time as we connect more deeply with God and with our inner longings.

Weddings, graduations, the birth of a new baby bring with them cultural rituals that we enjoy celebrating. What would it look like to develop your own rituals around events in the life of your family? One extended family I know, always gathers the evening before someone in the family leaves for vacation. It's not an elaborate celebration; it's simply a time to wish the traveler(s) well and to say, "I love you" one more time. In another family, when a child loses the first tooth, that child is able to request a special meal for supper. Maybe getting a driver's license is something to ritualize. In my own family, we love celebrating birthdays so much that we have created half-birthday parties as well, complete with special treats and a small gift for the half-birthday person. Our congregation encourages children celebrating their first communion to wear a special stole that is created during an educational event about what it means to receive this holy meal.

Rituals whether they are as elaborate as a wedding or as simple as inviting someone to tea and wrapping them in a colorful cloth add meaning to our lives. They allow us to connect in more profound ways with God and each other, as they validate and celebrate our identities as members of a community. They allow us to glimpse the sacred in the midst of the ordinary events of our lives.

Reflection from *Alive Now*

"One of the richly layered aspects of the sacraments is the ways in which the sacraments sanctify normal human life. Eating and drinking and bathing must surely be the most mundane and often-practiced activities of humanity, and yet, in the sacraments, they take on a spiritual weight that brings us to the center of what we believe."

From the Editor's Note by Melissa Tidwell, *Alive Now*, March/April 2005
(Nashville: The Upper Room, © 2005), page 2. Used by permission.
www.upperroom.org/alivenow



Reflection from *Rules for Prayer*

"It is unlikely that we will deepen our relationship with God in a casual or haphazard manner. There will be a need for some intentional commitment and some reorganization in our own lives. But there is nothing that will enrich our lives more than a deeper and clearer perception of God's presence in the routine of daily living."

Reprinted from *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, September/October 1987, Vol. II, No. 5.
Copyright 1987 by Upper Room Ministries. Used by permission.
For information about ordering *Weavings* call 1-800-972-6433.

Think About...

Groups that have been together for one or more years may want to use the questions with ■◻

It might be helpful to remind members of the group that when we speak of faith practices, we mean things like prayer, reading scripture or sacred readings, keeping Sabbath, serving others, worship, intentional spiritual friendships, confession, and self-examination, and others.

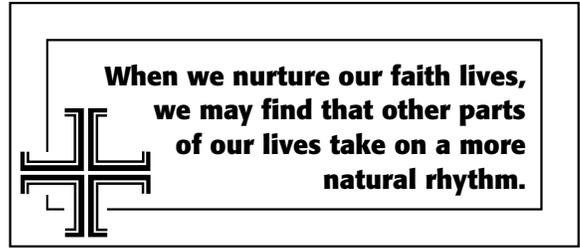
- What prevents you from carving out time for faith practices and rituals in your life?
- Do you have any rituals for noting the passing of time or celebrating milestones?
- ◻ Tell about a time when a common action became a sacred time for you. How might we create rituals out of daily practices? Can you think of any ways that your daily rituals, like bathing or buying groceries, can become sacred times (e.g. thanking God for your baptism while you shower)?
- If an alien were to land and observe us going through the motions of our everyday lives, what activities might be mistaken for rituals (e.g., brushing our teeth, walking the dog, etc.)? What might they say about how these ordinary "rituals" seem to affect our lives on a day-to-day basis?
- What rituals and faith practices have you incorporated or would you consider adding into your daily life? How does/would incorporating those elements make part of your day sacred for you?
- ◻ As you think about the faith practices that you have intentionally incorporated into your life, which have been the most meaningful for you? What has made them meaningful?
- What faith practices from other faith traditions are you aware of? Which ones would you like to incorporate into your own faith practice?
- ◻ Why do you think that ritual is so important for some people and doesn't seem to have the same importance for others?
- ◻ In what ways has this small group been a ritual or faith practice for you? What rituals or faith practices have you added to your life because of being in this group?

What's my response?

Point out this section to the small group. Read through the choices as a group and ask members to choose an activity that they would like to try for the month ahead. Group members don't need to choose the same response. Members may talk about their response and how they used it through the month at the next session, if they wish.



Often our lives become so busy that without even realizing it, our time for prayer, scripture study, or other faith practices is subsumed by more secular duties. When we take the time to nurture our faith lives, we may find that the other parts of our lives take on a more natural rhythm. In the next month, be mindful of the part that ritual, prayer, worship, and Bible study play in your life. Select one of the following suggestions to focus on in the month ahead. Set aside time to spend with God, or develop a new family ritual that is meaningful for you.



Prayer

- As always, pray for members of your small group this month.
- Take a walk through your neighborhood and notice the sights around you. As you pass the homes, pray for the people who live in them.
- For a week, keep track of when you pray and what you pray about. Then set aside a regular time each day for prayer when you would be most likely to pray. If possible, pray in the same place every day.
- Begin a short ritual of prayer and praise either early in the morning or before you go to bed at night. Experiment with the format, which might include lighting a candle, reading a devotion or the Bible, or simply being silent and listening to God.
- Try to pray before each meal during this month. If you are eating with your family, you may want to pray out loud, thanking God for the food and praying for the people who grew and prepared the food that you are eating.
- Find a friend to pray with you this month. Talk to this person at the beginning of the month and exchange prayer requests. Pray these prayer requests each time you pray. If possible, check in with the friend midway through the month and ask if there is anything else that you can pray for. Include personal prayer requests and also for those whom you may not know. If possible, meet with your prayer partner each week for coffee and prayer.
- Choose an object to carry with you at all times—it can be a pebble, a small cross, a prayer card, anything small that you can fit in your pocket. The purpose of carrying this object is to remind you to be conscious of God’s presence in your life or to remind you to pray.
- Icons are representations of holy figures or places. Make an icon of a sacred place in your life to remind you to pray and to help you focus during your prayer time. Use a photograph of a place that is sacred to you; it can be any natural or human-made place that has significance for you. Make a copy of this photo and add a Bible verse such as the first two verses of Psalm 48 (“Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain ²beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.”). Then place it in the spot that you have chosen to use for daily prayer.

Scripture and Sacred Reading

- Pick out devotionals that you would enjoy reading, then set aside a time for it each day. *Listening to Your Life* by Frederick Buechner provides a variety of daily readings selected from his writings. *Sources of Strength* by Jimmy Carter contains meditations on specific passages from scripture. Check out the church library, the bookstore at Luther Seminary, or any local bookstore for more ideas.



- For centuries, the Benedictine Order has used *lectio divina*, a slow, contemplative reading of Bible passages, as a way to listen to what God is saying to us through God's word. Learn more about *lectio divina* at www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html. This web site offers a step-by-step outline of the practice.
- Try *lectio divina* at least once this week. Choose a short passage (not more than 5 to 10 verses) from scripture and read it expecting that God will address you with a direct and personal message. Read this passage each day and try to find connections between what's happening in your life and what God is saying in the passage.
- Choose a week and resolve to read the Bible each day that week. Pick a topic and read several passages in scripture to find out what Jesus had to say about that topic. Some topics to think about are money (Luke 16:3, Matthew 6:19-21) or forgiveness (Mark 2:7-11, Matthew 6:12-15, Luke 6:37). If you have a Bible with a concordance, look up the topic and read the verses listed in the concordance. Note your thoughts and any applications for your life.
- Join a Bible study. Check out the church newsletter to find one that interests you, the lay class brochure from Luther Seminary, or the local papers for community Bible studies.
- Begin to memorize scripture. Pick a phrase from one of the Bible readings for this session, carry it with you, and read it each day until you have committed it to memory.

Solitude and Reflection

- Before you turn the calendar to a new month, take a moment to reflect on the month that has just passed. You may want to write down some signs of grace that you experienced during the month that you would like to remember. Pray for the coming month that God will be present in your life.
- Can you remember your baptism? Do you know the date? Look up your baptismal certificate. If you have children, note the dates of their baptisms on the calendar, along with your own, and celebrate these dates when they come around.
- Start a "thankfulness journal." At the end of each day, write down three things that you would like to thank God for.

Worship

- When you attend worship this month, really listen to the music. Sing out and enjoy praising God. Thank a member of the choir or a musician who played that day for the gift of music in worship.

Logistics (10 minutes)

Members of the group should have briefly discussed the fact that this is the final session. You have probably called each person since the previous session, so you may have a pretty good idea of what each person is planning for the next step (reconvenanting, getting together on a less frequent basis, disbanding to go in other directions, etc.).

For more specific information, please refer to the tip sheet that is inserted between Sessions 7 and 8 in this Leader Guide.

Lead a discussion of what the group wants to do. The following information appears in the participant material.

It's time to consider the next step in the life of our group. At the last session we talked about the choices that we face. The choices are:

- Decide to continue and make another covenant for the next period of time that we would like to be together.
- Conclude our time together so that members can pursue other interests separately.
- Recognize that some members may want to continue on, while others pursue other interests.
- Get together on a less frequent basis to allow people to pursue other interests, but to keep in touch.

Closing (10 minutes)

Provide information about the session next month. Point out the importance of making the commitment to attend each session. Reiterate that one of the most important aspects of these groups is the relationship with other group members.

Close the session with worship by reading Psalm 104:1-13 responsively. The leader begins with the introduction, then reads the odd verses, the group responds on the even verses.

Psalm 104:1-13:

"One ritual that keeps our faith strong is worshiping in community. In Psalm 104, the psalmist relates the creation story in poetic form. It's easy to praise and worship God as we think about how wonderfully God has created the world and everything in it. Let's close the session by reading Psalm 104 responsively. I will start by reading verse 1, and you can respond by reading verse 2."

Leader: ¹Bless the LORD, O my soul.
 O LORD my God, you are very great.
 You are clothed with honor and majesty,

Group: ²**wrapped in light as with a garment.**
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

Leader: ³you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
 you make the clouds your chariot,
 you ride on the wings of the wind,

Group: ⁴**you make the winds your messengers,**
fire and flame your ministers.



Leader: ⁵You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.

**Group: ⁶You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.**

Leader: ⁷At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

**Group: ⁸They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.**

Leader: ⁹You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

**Group: ¹⁰You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,**

Leader: ¹¹giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.

**Group: ¹²By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.**

Leader: ¹³From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

Together: Amen

**If you'd like to read more...**

- Barton, Ruth Haley. *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Bass, Dorothy C. Ed. *Practicing Our Faith*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997.
- Beckmen, Richard J. *Beginning Conversations with God*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.
- Brooke, Avery. *Plain Prayers in a Complicated World*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993.
- Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978.
- Foster, Richard J. & Smith, James Bryan, Ed. *Devotional Classics*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005.
- Jones, Tony. *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Daily Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.
- Jones, Tony. *Pray*. Colorado Springs, CO: NAVPRESS, 2003.
- Jones, Tony. *Read, Think, Pray, Live*. Colorado Springs, CO: NAVPRESS, 2003.
- Nouwen, Henri. *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1981.
- Paulsell, William O. *Rules for Prayer*. New York/Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993.
- Ryan, Thomas P. *Disciplines for Christian Living: Interfaith Perspectives*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1993.
- "Signs of Grace," *Alive Now*, March/April, 2005. Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 2005.
www.upperroom.org/alivenow
- Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to Christian Spiritual Life*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.
- "Ways of Prayer: Designing a Personal Rule of Life," *Weavings*, November-December, 1987, Nashville, TN: The Upper Room. www.weavings.org

