

Leader's Guide

TO



PRAYER JOURNAL

Ten Topical Studies
for Small Groups

The Rev. Benjamin Davis

MBM Publishers



WWW.MBMPublishers.com

MBM Publishers
62 Beechwood Road, Suite 102
Wellesley, MA 02482

Copyright © 2008 by MBM Publishers

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the permission in writing from the publisher, except in case of those pages identified for the purpose of reproducing for group use.

International Standard Book Number (ISBN): 978-0-9796511-1-3

Photo Back Cover: by Fred Gronberg

Preface

I am extremely enthusiastic about *Melissa's Prayer Journal*. I feel it can be a great resource, especially, perhaps, for youth and young people in the church. It is incredibly rich, moving, accessible, and profound. At the same time, however, since it was written as an actual diary of faith, I have found that it takes some extra work in helping groups use, enjoy, and profit from it. And so, based on my experiences, here is a guide which hopefully provides some ways "into" this amazing document of faith. May you and your groups plumb its depths and grow in faith.

I am ever grateful to Janice Bell Meisenhelder, with whom I collaborated on this project. In addition to her great administrative help and support, she also provided some key components of this "Leader's Guide." Her openness, energy, and faith inspired me throughout.

Blessings,
Rev. Ben Davis

Table of Contents:

I. Introduction and Background

1. Melissa's Prayer Journal (MPJ):
An Honest Window to Faith
2. The Richness and Challenge of MPJ
3. Using MPJ as a Bridge to Faith
4. Safety as a Basis of Growth in Faith
5. Timing of the Sessions: Options
6. Structure of Each Session
7. Reminder of Critical Strategies
8. Key Points for Introducing
Melissa's Prayer Journal to the Group.

II. Study Topics:

1. Prayer – The Basis of Faith..... 15
How to talk to God
2. Growing our Faith 20
 - a. Turning to God for Help
 - b. Making Time for God
3. Applying Faith to Real Life Issues ... 29
 - a. Sickness & Mortality
 - b. Relationships
 - c. Loneliness
4. Understanding our Faith 45
 - a. Thankfulness
 - b. Miracles
5. Sharing our Faith 56
 - a. Reaching out to others
 - b. Prayer Partners

I. Introduction and Background

1. Melissa's Prayer Journal: **An Honest Window to Faith**

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Melissa's Prayer Journal (MPJ) is that it is the real-life, honest reflections of teenager's journey of faith. It is the rich, unembellished journaling to God of a young person going through very typical, and some extraordinary, life experiences.

Indeed, when Melissa was writing this journal, she did not do so to create something that would be published. The writing is not intended to be instructional or exemplary. (Though it is!) Melissa was not striving to be inspirational or profound. (Though she was!) She was not attempting to show herself at her best, most faithful, or most admirable. (And so, what a witness!) This is Melissa journaling as Melissa, as she works to connect with God, friends, new relationships, family. It is Melissa writing to God as she discovers and records highs and lows of everyday life, as well as the specific struggles of cancer. It is the journal of a unique child of God, as we all are, who provides a most powerful window for us into the Christian faith.

It is important to be clear, in addition, that while Melissa did not write the journal to be published for others, it is clear that the publishing of this journal in this form is something she would have been very pleased with. As the content shows, Melissa celebrated nothing more than being able to share and spread her faith. Indeed, core to the creation of this journal, is honoring her own sense of God using her, to spread Christ's love and grace. And so, those who assembled this journal did so with the greatest care and consideration of Melissa's hopes, personality, and boundaries. Likewise, great care was taken to honor and respect the boundaries and roles of Melissa's friends and family.

In MPJ, we have a warm and comfortable invitation and opportunity to bear witness and even to join with Melissa on a remarkable journey of faith.

2. The Richness & Challenge of MPJ

When approached intentionally, I find the authenticity of MPJ can make it feel more powerful than a sermon and more real than a devotional book. As I've introduced MPJ to youth, I have come to see it as something like rare, contemporary, primary source material. Its flow and organization are written as they authentically occurred to Melissa. Youth and adults respond powerfully to its honest witness. The flip side of this richness, however, is that it also presents an added layer of challenge for those working with it. If part of why MPJ is so uniquely beneficial is that it provides a clear and unadorned window to faith, the corresponding difficulty is that it was not written in order to be an orderly account with a beginning, middle, end.

That is the main reason for this Leader's Guide; hopefully it will be a resource for group leaders in using MPJ. Hopefully this will help in unpacking MPJ to get at the embedded, rich faith lessons. I find the approach here similar to the type of reflection required for getting the most out of scripture. This guide is simply to help your group discover the transforming power of MPJ.

3. Using MPJ as a Bridge to Faith

This guide is geared towards helping people across the spectrum of Christian belief to use MPJ. Melissa was a person with a strong and clear faith. Those with a similar faith would be able to resonate easily with Melissa's language, experiences, and images.

However, for youth or young people new to or more skeptical of Christianity, this guide will hopefully provide a vital bridge.

Indeed, part of how I have found MPJ so useful is as giving newcomers and skeptics a glimpse of the fabric of a stronger Christian faith. Much of my experience of working with

youth has been with those who are largely “unchurched,” or at least “questioning” or “skeptical.” In this context, youth ministry is often an outreach to youth in a culture which no longer sees church as relevant, true, or valuable. And so, ministry efforts involve inviting youth to “just come,” providing a fun, safe, and loving place from them to just “be.” Youth respond and attend programs, valuing the relationships, the activities, the “space.”

Of course, we do engage in faith practices such as prayer, serving others, intentional conversations, and so on. But while this ministry is biblically based, we have found that we need to be extremely intentional in how we introduce biblical images and language. When we are not careful, youth can find it “too much,” or “artificial” and we are in danger of losing them!

The question remains: how can we help the youth be open to and move towards a richer, deeper, and more nurturing, more rigorous biblical faith.

In this context, MPJ has been so helpful in that it helps youth try on or experience Christianity in a safe way. They can witness the richness, without having to quash their questions and resistance. They know Melissa’s writing is 100% real. That counts for a lot for young people!

4. Safety as a Basis for Growth in Faith

Therefore, key to using MPJ in this context, is creating a sense of safety for the people who are experiencing it. As questioning or skeptical youth encounter MPJ, it is important that they feel empowered to ask questions, engage the claims, and articulate discomfort. In that sense, this guide is geared towards eliciting participants’ honest feelings and reactions.

Of course, this is not an end in itself. Rather the point of this is to help youth feel comfortable in these initial, exploring steps of faith. If they feel honored and empowered, they will be open to taking next steps. And isn’t that necessary in order to grow in faith?

This approach is appropriate with MPJ, as Melissa embodies such a strong faith. And so, by feeling secure in engaging MPJ, the students will find solid ground on which to then encounter and consider what a stronger faith may mean for them!

With all this in mind, the Guide is written such that the leader of the sessions would aim, above all, to bring the group to the place of genuine conversation and engagement. For those new to faith especially, they would be encouraged to ask questions or articulate hesitations, without feeling self-conscious or “stupid.” (Interestingly, I have found that much of youth’s hesitation about Christianity occurs, not because of skepticism, but because they simply don’t know or understand the basics of faith! None of us, especially perhaps youth, want to feel “ignorant” or “stupid!” MPJ allows them to observe what faith “in action” is like!)

The questions provided by this guide for each study, then, are deliberately open-ended and broad. The goal is to encourage engagement and stimulate questions. While key points are provided for each lesson, it may be just as profitable for the conversation to wander!

Hopefully following this guide will help leaders to get a sense of where the participants are in terms of their knowledge, experience, comfort level, and overall life situations. By this, leaders can more effectively work to address the needs and opportunities on a deeper and more meaningful level.

Since the conversation will be less structured, different groups will take the discussion to very different points. Even within the group, youth will vary in their responses. In general it is often best to trust this process, as long as it feels like it is helping to create an affirming and safe space for participants to be vulnerable and honest. In that sense, it is fine to be flexible and allow conversation to go off-track, and then gently bring people back to the vital issues dealt with in the text. Ultimately, of course, it is important to bring the focus back to core principles (such as relationship to God, other relationships, values, important

life issues, etc.).

Remember as well that each group and each week will be different. In some sessions, youth may talk non-stop, while in others will be quiet. Especially in quiet groups, be ready to ask a lot of questions and have the youth give their responses to the questions included in each session. (More on this below.) Remember too, that participants can be equally spiritually nourished by a quiet session as an animated one.

Overall, it is key to be centered and prayerful in advance of the meeting. Remember that the Holy Spirit is present and leading the conversation! And doesn't it seem that your own prayer life will always be the source and ground of your ministry?!

5. Timing of the Sessions: Options

This guide can be used in consecutive or intermittent sessions, such as in a Youth Group, Sunday School, or Confirmation Class. If used in weekly or periodic sessions, you might want to keep the journals on site until you are completely done with the curriculum, then allow youth to take them home and write in them as they wish. You may begin with the first study, and then choose the topics/studies that are most relevant for your group.

MPJ would also be rich as a focus for a retreat weekend. If used this way, choose several key studies to offer throughout the retreat, allowing youth to read the journal independently as well during less structured time.

6. Structure of Each Session

How you structure each session may vary. However, here is a basic, suggested order.

- * Start with a warm welcome!
- * Then say a prayer—suggested prayers are included.
Youth could lead this as well!
- * Often some kind of name game, ice breaker, or other type of game is helpful and positive!

- * Introduce the topic briefly. In early sessions, it would be important to go over some of the background (as described in this guide), in a way that feels most helpful and necessary for your group.
- * Pass out questions on separate paper.
- * Read Journal page(s) as a group.
- * Provide quiet time for group to reflect and jot down their responses.
- * Open with discussion of the questions. Invite all responses.
- * If group is quiet, reassure and invite responses again. It might be necessary to call on youth by name!
- * After everyone has had a chance to speak, bring in key points as appropriate.
- * Read related scripture & invite open responses.
- * Thank/ appreciate everyone and their contributions!
- * Close in prayer.

7. Reminder of Critical Strategies

- * Create an open and accepting atmosphere. Emphasize that all responses and feelings are valid: disbelief, uncertainty, doubt, confusion, anger, or any other feeling!
- * Let the group take the discussion where they are, not just where you want them to go.
- * Do a lot of listening and supportive questioning.
- * Allow for silence. Give the group time to digest and reflect.
- * Some of the studies deal with hard issues. Be sure to name this and to provide space for youth to healthfully process this!
- * Be ready to help put things in context and interpret in ways that are helpful to the participants!
- * Allow for all reactions and encourage questions and criticism. Only by knowing what they are thinking can you address their questions.

- * Allow the participants to criticize or take issue with Melissa. The benefit of using the journal is the authentic sharing allows for frank and candid reactions.
- * Be flexible. Use the studies in this guide in whatever order seems to address the questions that arise.
- * Make sure each person has their own copy of Melissa's Prayer Journal. When working with youth, it might be best to keep all copies on site until the completion of all the studies.
- * Use the text boxes as well as the prayer journal entries to make a point.
- * Utilize the Scripture in MPJ to illustrate how powerful "the Word" was to her, giving her strength, guidance, and peace. Biblical engagement provided personal touchstones for Melissa. This vital point is highlighted in each lesson.

8. Key Points for Introducing Melissa's Prayer Journal to the Group

When you first introduce MPJ at the first lesson, begin with a short introduction to the book, itself. Include the following points, regardless of which topic you choose for the first study.

- * *Melissa was 18 when she started this journal from a blank notebook.*
- * *She didn't write this with the intended outcome of others reading it. The entries are her real, unveiled, private talks with God.*
- * *However, the journal in this form, as a tool for others would have been very exciting to her! And a few sections have been deleted to honor Melissa's and other's privacy and boundaries.*
- * *By writing down her prayers, she could keep track of her thoughts and the answers to her prayers.*
- * *Melissa's journal is a real-life example of how faith can be a rich part of your life as well.*

II. Study Topics

1. Prayer- **The Basis of Faith**

1. Prayer-The Basis of Faith

Opening Prayer:

Loving God, we are grateful to be able to come together in this time of faith exploration and conversation. We are grateful for the presence and care of one another. We are grateful for this Journal, this rich faith document we can use to explore our own faith. We ask that we may be open to one another, to you, and to growing in faith. May we hear the quiet ways in which you may speak to us. In Christ's name, Amen.

Introduction:

(After introducing MPJ as described in section 8, p. 14, in previous chapter of this guide).

Melissa's first prayer in her journal explains why she is writing. We may all find that writing down prayers is helpful. Of course, however, while the writing part is optional, the praying part is really essential for understanding and growing in faith. From Melissa's prayer, we see some assumptions she makes about her own relationship to God. Let's see how she starts her dialog with the one she calls Creator.

Read: Page 4, Melissa's Prayer Journal (MPJ)

Questions to Answer Individually:

Use the following questions provided for some "encouraged journaling." Pages 18-19 of this guide offer tips for this process.

1. Prayer-The Basis of Faith

Read Page 4, MPJ. Then take a moment and just down answers to the following questions. Note, the point of considering these questions is not to write some perfect or final answer, but rather to get our own thinking and responding going!

1. This is your first time looking at Melissa's Prayer Journal. What are some initial reactions to this page? What are some words or phrases, thoughts or feelings that come to mind?

2. What do you find most interesting or insightful or provocative?

3. Are there things you find strange or confusing or new? What are they?

4. At this point, would you say you resonate/relate with how Melissa describes things? Why or why not?

[This page or these questions may be reproduced for group use]

Hints for this Process:

* Reproduce the previous questions on cards or paper and pass out with pens.

* Have group members write down their thoughts briefly in just words or phrases.

* Explain that no one else will see these cards/answers. They are just for encouraging engagement and stimulating thinking!

* Repeat that all answers are wanted and accepted. This is the time for questions.

* Allow time for participants to think and write. Don't hurry the process. Pay attention whether most people are done. Prime people for the end of this time by counting down with phrases like "alright, 1 minute," "30 seconds."

* Once everyone has written something and most seem to be done, pull the group together.

* Depending on the size of your group, it may be necessary to break up into smaller groups. An ideal number is anywhere from 5-10 people.

* Then, have a discussion. It might work well just to go through, and have each person answer each question. This makes clear the expectations of the youth- they all know they'll have to speak. Or, you might say, each person has to give responses to two or three of the questions.

* Be sure to remind people that this is not about getting a "right" answer. It's about honestly and authentically engaging!! Wherever people are is fine!!

* So, to start, you may say something like: "Okay, who wants to start. What did someone say for the first question..."

* And remember, some people may be shy. In this sense, don't force people. Allow them to share as they feel comfortable. At the same time, don't hesitate to call on people by name. Some youth are too shy to speak otherwise!*

* Organic discussion is great! It's really the goal. So, encourage/allow group members to respond to one another before you respond.

* You might think of saving your "Key Points" until after everyone has had time to share.

* In my experience, youths' questions ranged from awe, to confusion, to seeking, asking, "How can I have a faith, a relationship to God like Melissa's?"

* It is okay for you to have questions, to not have to answer the youths' questions! Part of what's nice about having MPJ, is that it allows you to be something of a neutral mediator between Melissa's strong witness and wherever the kids are.

*Key points are listed below to integrate into the discussion.

Key Points to Emphasize:

**One core part of Christianity is having an actual, dynamic and continuing relationship with God.*

** To build this, it can be vital that we talk to God in prayer! That's key for having a "relationship" with God! (As Melissa shows, writing is helpful—on a computer or by hand!)*

** Another key part of our faith is that God wants to help us in all areas of our life! Isn't that cool!*

** Also, God should be a priority! If we want our faith to be a meaningful and enriching part of our lives, we need to make room in our lives for God.*

Related Scripture: Read aloud MPJ, page 68.

Why did Melissa copy this whole passage? How did she title it? Why do you think it was meaningful to her? What does it say to you?

Closing Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for the privileged of coming to as we are, even as loved and forgiven people. Help us to remember how much we need you and to see your answers to our prayers in our daily lives. Be with us all as we leave this place and go forward into our lives,. In Jesus name, Amen.

2. Growing Our Faith

a. Turning to God for Help

b. Making Time for God

2-a. Growing our Faith: **Turning to God for Help**

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, We are grateful to come gather here in this time. As we continue in our prayerful reflection with Melissa's prayer Journal, we are grateful that you are there to walk this journey with us. We are grateful that you are there with us in the journey of life. Especially when we may have questions, we thank you for being there as our problem-solver. May we be open to learning through what we consider today. May we even become closer and closer to You, In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction:

Now that we have gotten a glimpse of Melissa's faith, we might ask, "Well, how did she get there?"

Her letters to God give us insight into her growth in a sense meaningful relationship with God. To sum this up, we could say that Melissa had two practices for growing her faith: 1. She turned to God for help, and 2. she made time for God.

In the first entry we will read, Melissa knew she was about to have a difficult conversation with her parents. She didn't want to lose her temper and say hurtful things, yet her feelings were running high. So, she asked God to help. Her recorded details of the problem were edited out of the published journal, but God's response to her is given.

Read: Pages 6-9, MPJ This should be read out loud.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Follow the same process/ instructions listed in the previous study, pages 18 & 19 of this guide, using the following questions.

3. At this point, would you say you resonate/ relate with how Melissa describes things? Why or why not?

4. Melissa asked for God's help with something as everyday as a conversation with her parents. Would you think that something like that is too trivial to talk about in prayer? Why or why not?

5. How did Melissa know God answered her prayer? (page 8, MPJ). What do you make of that?

[These 2 pages or questions may be reproduced for group use]

Key Points to Emphasize:

- * Sometimes people “feel” God (not an emotion, but a sense of presence) and can “see” (not visually, but understand) God working in their lives. Often it seems that this kind of perception is only felt by the person going through the experience. Melissa had this sense of being able to see God’s hand helping her behave in a more constructive way during her conversation with her parents.
- * Melissa brought her anxieties and joys to God. She prayed about even the “little” day to day concerns. (Are they really little??)
- * What are the every day concerns you might pray about?
- * Melissa’s relationships went more smoothly when she relied on God to help her!

Related Scripture: Read aloud MPJ, pages 38-39.

These are Bible verses that Melissa chose for a prayer journal that she made for a close friend. How do the underlined verses relate to her prayer on page 6, asking for help?

Why do you think Melissa used these verses to give her friend? What seems special about them?

Closing Prayer:

Thank you, Loving God, that you are always there for us when we need you. Help us to turn to you, hear you, trust you, and love you more and more each day. Be with us in the days to come, in the large things and the small. In Jesus name. Amen.

2-b. Growing our Faith: **Making Time for God**

Opening Prayer:

God of all, Thank you again for gathering us here. As we gather, we know that our lives can be so packed, and we can be so bombarded with demands, that it can feel like we have no time. Help us to balance all this. And teach us how to make space in our lives for You. Be to us as a master organizer and counselor. And be with us again in this time. In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction:

We pick up from our question from last time: How did Melissa develop such a strong faith? We remember that she had some basic strategies that many Christians use to help their lives run more smoothly and to help them feel God’s love in their lives.

Again, Melissa had two steps for growing her faith: 1.) she turned to God for help, and 2.) she made time for God.

In the following pages, we see one of her strategies for keeping her life feel “on track” and for helping her connection to God be stronger.

Read: Page 30-32– MPJ, Out loud as a group.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Follow the same instructions listed on pages 18-19 of this guide, using the following questions as in the previous studies.

3. What strategies did she use to help her stay connected with God?

4. Melissa writes a lot in these pages, but none of it is her prayers. What does she choose to record and why do you think she chose this content?

5. Melissa highlights in both pink and blue on these pages. In other parts of the journal, she uses yellow. Can you figure out her color-code system?

Key Points To Emphasize:

** Melissa felt she was easily distracted from God by social life and school pressure, just like we all do! So she set up a system: her devotional reading was dated and short, leaving her no excuses!*

** She also wrote down what God helped her to see, in order to remember and apply it. In this sense, her prayer journal was not just her prayers, but rather God's messages to her (top of page 32 is labeled 'a message from God'). Melissa could feel God speaking to her about her life and circumstances through her daily reading.*

Related Scripture: Read aloud MPJ, p. 61.

- ◆ *What do these verses mean?*
- ◆ *What would you say is "truly life"?*
- ◆ *How does God desire that we pray?*
- ◆ *These are more verses that Melissa hung on to for encouragement and guidance. How do they make you feel?*

Closing Prayer:

Caring God, We hear that you call us to pray in any time or place. And yet, it seems we are so good at avoiding making that time to be with you.. Help us to understand that time with you is key in making everything right! Keep us close to you, and help us follow you ever more closely. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

3. Applying Our Faith to Real Life Issues

- a. Sickness & Mortality**
- b. Relationships**
- c. Loneliness**

3-a. Real Life Issues: **Sickness & Mortality**

Notes to Leader:

This is an intense study, with a powerful and heavy topic. It is probably beneficial for most groups to do this study, since working with to MPJ may engender questions of illness, death, and God's role with such issues. Again, this is an additional benefit of MPJ- it provides a vehicle for dealing with these issues, which are key to life and key to faith. Indeed, the issue of mortality is crucial in Christianity. In many ways, the Resurrection is at the core of Christianity.

Therefore, in a way, this topic is arguably the most important to address. In this, though, it is important to be sensitive to the needs of the group and to assess at what point to present this topic. Remember the studies in this book can be used in any order that fits your group and your goals.

The recommended structure for processing topics of sickness and death varies from the rest. Here you may need to give people time to talk and share their thoughts and feelings before encountering Melissa's prayers. Again, avoid the temptation to come up with answers during this discussion, and feel free to delay the group from trying to reach answers too quickly. Sometimes our faith grows as we contemplate the mystery of God and our own inability to completely grasp the infinite.

Opening Prayer

Dear Lord, The thought of being sick or considering our own mortality are two places we do not want to go. And so we ask you to help us to see how Your goodness is present even in the most difficult of circumstances. As we consider this, we ask that listening to Melissa's voice may help us hear your words of reassurance and love. This we pray to you, Our Divine Healer and Helper, in Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction:

One of the tough parts of this journal is that we get to know Melissa, sometimes identify with her concerns. Then we have to face the fact that, despite many very earnest prayers, she did die, and now is with God in a way beyond our clear knowing. As people of faith, we have the consolation that Melissa is in God's secure embrace, that she is in heaven. And yet we may still experience fear, anxiety, questions, and doubts as we consider this topic.

As we move into this study, we can think of whether we have had situations where we have encountered illness or death?

As we recall these, or as we think of these topics apart from our own experiences, we might consider our feelings and thoughts... We might ask of these topics:

What do we think about them?

How do we feel about them?

As we consider Melissa's journey, we might have questions such as:

How does God let someone like Melissa (someone like us, even) die?

Melissa had such faith in God. So, where was God when she needed God most?

Today we are going to see what Melissa's perspective was about her illness. But before doing that, we're going to explore some of our own thoughts and questions. So, before we read from MPJ, answer the following questions.

** In your life, have you ever had first-hand experience (yourself or loved ones) of serious illness or death?*

** What are thoughts or feelings you have about these topics? Are they comfortable? Uncomfortable? What else?*

** What questions, fears, or concerns do you have?*

** What hopes, confidence, reassurances do have?*

Key Points for Preliminary Discussion:

- ⇒ *Common reactions to loss—experienced or imagined—include anger, guilt, sadness, and fear. If you are feeling any of these or any other reactions, this is normal!*
- ⇒ *God calls us to bring all our feelings, even our anger and fear, to God! Also, part of what’s nice about this group, is that we can bring them to one another. We all share having to face these types of hard things at some time!*
- ⇒ *Key to our faith is that God is with in all these things. We’ll get to this more later, but key to our faith, is that in Christ, God chooses to be with us, even in death. Moreover, God’s promise to things such as sickness and death is resurrection—new, full, and eternal life!*
- ⇒ *If all that sounds big, don’t worry for now. We’ll continue talking about it here. Plus, as a Christian, you’ll continue working through that your whole life!!*

Read: Page 16-17, 27- MPJ,

Out loud as a group.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Follow the same instructions listed on pages 18-19 in this guide, using the following questions. Allow participants to jot down answers and continue with open discussion.

Key Points to Emphasize and Share:

♥ *Melissa is honest with God about being desperate. We can bring every negative feeling to God. God's wants to hear them! Melissa prayed when she was angry, fearful, distraught, guilty, and disgusted, but she didn't always write them down. Prayer is one way of coping with our negative feelings, because God really does help and answer.*

♥ *Melissa focused on the positive and gave thanks for the ability to cope with her illness.*

♥ *Melissa used Christian music, friends and scripture to be strengthened and encouraged and to lighten her mood.*

♥ *Melissa's greatest desire was to be close to God. She lived out the Christian understanding that, while we all die, by being intentionally close to God, we have the grace-filled truth of living most fully in this life, as well as forever.*

♥ *On page 18 of MPJ, the next prayer, we perceive Melissa's happiness. God gave her blessings that filled her life with happiness.*

♥ *On page 27 of MPJ, we see that Melissa had everything to live for. She was in love and hoped to marry Jamie and have a family. When her faith was shaky, she prayed for faith: "please give me peace of mind about putting my life in your hands". She chose to trust God, and asked God to help her with the feelings of peace to follow that choice.*

From Janice Meisenhelder, Melissa's Mom:

A month prior to her death and entrance to heaven, Melissa submitted a course paper to one of her college professors. In this paper, she made this statement:

"Through God's abundant love and grace, I have been able to see all the blessings He has provided for me on this difficult journey.... Indeed, a huge part of my life has been my witness to my non-Christian friends about the miracles I have experienced. Never before have I felt like I have had something so meaningful to share and now I can't contain my joy in the Lord."

Melissa's faith made every day count! She was filled with joy!

Melissa also told many of her friends in the few weeks prior to her death, **"If God takes me home now, it is to spare me of something worse."**

Melissa's friends report that her peace was so deep, that as she hugged them and said "good-bye" 10 days before her death, she turned at the doorway and said, **"Guys, I know where I'm going."**

We don't know why God allowed Melissa to go home so young. But we know she experienced a peace that was beyond our understanding. And we know she was clear and certain about becoming immortal in her next life as she entered heaven.

Related Scripture: Read MPJ, page 52-53.

- ◆ *Why did Melissa write down these verses?*
- ◆ *How do you think they helped her?*
- ◆ *What do they say to you?*
- ◆ *What do these pages tell us about how Melissa gained her strength and peace?*

[Emphasize points in commentary, page 53: Christian music and scripture got her through many tough days].

Closing Prayer:

God of grace and love, fill our hearts with your peace, just as you filled Melissa's. Fill our minds with trust in you, and fill our lives with your awesome love. May we also feel the joy in knowing you, a joy so great, it can't be contained. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

3-b. Real Life Issues: **Relationships**

Opening Prayer:

Lord, We are wired to be close to others, and that is our deep need. Show us how to trust you with this most precious part of our lives, for you are the eternal Match-Maker and Giver of all good things. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Introduction

Melissa has an inspired insight into her relationship with her boyfriend, Jamie. In the middle of a contemporary worship service (called Catacombs), she suddenly felt like she understood what the relationship needed. She captures her insight on the first two pages, and then ends with a short prayer. This is an example of her using her prayer journal to record for herself the lessons she receives from God. Thus, her journal becomes a dialog: her prayers to God as well as God's answers and instructions to her.

Read Page 10-11, 44-47, of **MPJ**,
Out loud as a group.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Follow the same instructions listed on pages 18-19 of this guide and use the following questions. Allow participants to jot down answers and follow with open discussion, as in the previous studies.

4. Have you ever wanted to pray with a friend? How about one of your parents or a sibling?

5. What are your thoughts about the commentary on page 11 of MPJ? On page 47 of MPJ?

[These pages or questions may be reproduced for group use]

Key Points to Emphasize:

**In faith, we would say that God wants to be involved in our whole lives, our relationships included. Why? Well, we have the sense that God loves us, wants the best for us, and wants to guide us. When we have questions, we can be confident that God knows us and who will make us happy and better people.*

** The people we pray with hear our deepest desires and fears as we bring them to God. Prayer bonds people together in a unique way, not just couples, but families and friends, too.*

** According to statistics, couples who pray together score higher on marital satisfaction scales, thus prayer helps build happy and strong marriages.¹ Melissa and Jamie prayed together over the phone almost every night.*

Related Scripture: Read MPJ, Page 70

** Do these passages give you the impression that God wants us to be alone?*

** If everyone followed the instructions in the last Bible verse from Romans 12, who would our friendships and family relationships look different?*

Closing Prayer:

Dear God, We thank you for the powerful tool of prayer which can build our friendships, our families, our romantic relationships, our lives. Help us to use this gift you have given us wisely, and to listen to your voice in all relationships. Give us a faith to trust you in all things. In Jesus name, Amen.

¹Koenig, H.G., McCullough, M.E., & Larson, D.B. (2001). *Handbook of Religion and Health*. N.Y.: Oxford U. Press. pp 191+.

3-c. Real Life Issues: **Loneliness**

Opening Prayer:

Dear Lord, We struggle with so many feelings that we don't like: things like insecurity, self-consciousness, and loneliness. Be with us today, as we consider these. May we be open to what you would have us learn about bringing our problems to You. Thank you, Lord, that even if we can't feel you or perceive you or even believe in you, You are still there for us. Be with us now and show us your ways, Our Friend and Faithful Parent. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Introduction:

In much of the Prayer Journal, Melissa seems to have her life together and her head straight, even though she's going through tough cancer treatments. But in the passage we read today, we can really see her pain. Ironically, this entry was written after her first 10 months of cancer chemotherapy was finished, and no trace of cancer was found in her body! She and her family thought she was cured!! It was September, and Melissa was re-adjusting to campus life as a regular, full-time student. Let's see what she is feeling at this time.

Read: pages 22-23, of MPJ – Out loud.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Pass out the following questions, as instructed on page 18-19 of this guide.

3-c. Real Life Issues: Loneliness

Read MPJ, pages 22-23.

1. How would you describe how Melissa is feeling?
2. Have you ever felt anything like Melissa does here? What was your experience like?
3. What strikes you about her prayer-poem?

4. What does she ask God for?

5. What do you do when you are feeling distressed or down?

6. How does feeling badly affect what we believe?

[These 2 pages or these questions may be reproduced for group use]

Key Points to Emphasize:

** As pointed out in the text box, our faith needs to be built on “facts,” not just “feelings.” What do we mean by this? Well, Christianity is built on an understanding or claim about God. Our faith is that in Christ above all, God has come to humanity, assured us, saved us. At the core of Christianity is not what humans do or feel or even believe, but what God has done! God’s love and grace, not human feelings or assertions, are the foundation of our faith.*

**We all have times of feeling lonely, forgotten, useless and worthless. That is part of being human. But our feelings at times like these are, in a certain sense, not reliable. However, God is reliable!*

** Our negative feelings do not stay. By clinging to God, Melissa was soon feeling better and back to focusing on Jamie.*

Related Scripture: *Read MPJ, Page 55.

** How do these passages relate to Melissa’s feelings?*

** What does God promise us?*

Closing Prayer:

Amazing God, who promises to be with us through good times and bad, who promises to bless us as we trust You, be with us this week. Stay close to us as we leave this place and fill us with the peace that is beyond comprehension. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

4. Understanding Our Faith

a. Thankfulness

b. Miracles

4-a. Understanding Our Faith: Thankfulness

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, We are quick to come to you in times of sadness and need, but slower to remember you when everything is going great. Help us to see the power and joy in praise and thanksgiving, that our hearts may grow light and our minds strong as we focus on all that You have given us, our Provider and Giver of every good thing. In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction:

One powerful way that Melissa handled tough times was to focus on the good things, the blessings in her life. Melissa said thank you 26 times in her prayer journal, more often than any other word.

Read: Pages 12-15, 28-29, of MPJ– Out loud.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Pass out the following questions, as instructed on page 18-19 of this guide.

4. What are some things for which you are thankful?

(How about in the following categories?)

Relationships:

Comforts:

Blessing that happened this week:

[These 2 pages or questions may be reproduced for group use]

Key Points to Emphasize:

** Melissa was thankful for big things, like relationships, and little things, like a friend's smile or a good laugh. She wrote a poem on the importance of the little things in getting you through a hard day.*

** By focusing on her blessings, Melissa was able to enjoy the good parts of every day.*

** We live in a culture that bombards us with messages that we need more, want more and must spend more. Thus, our culture focuses on what we do not have, rather than all we do have. If we live by our culture, we will continually feel short-changed. If we live focusing on our blessings, we feel blessed and have the happiness of gratitude.*

Related Scripture: Read MPJ, Page 34.

** God calls us to give thanks constantly, not for God's sake, but for ours. Thanksgiving is healing.*

Closing Prayer:

Most Gracious God, We thank you for showering us with more blessings than we can name. Thank you for each other and for the most amazing privilege of praying to You, our loving Creator, through our Savior, Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

4-b. Understanding our Faith: Miracles!

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, Our faith is often shaky, and sometimes it is hard to believe You are there and listening. Trying to believe in miracles and seeing your fingerprints in this world is even harder. Please, Lord, give us the eyes of faith to see what you would have us learn in this lesson, our Loving Teacher and even Miracle-Worker. In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction:

Melissa's Mom found a sticky-note in Melissa's prayer journal about an incident that she meant to record. Her Mom wrote it up for her, and shared it in this book. Today we will read a prayer in which Melissa makes a request, and then hear from her Mom how God answered that prayer.

Read: page 20-21, MPJ- Out loud.

♦ Also read the following miracle stories together. Reproduce the following pages (52-53 of Leader's Guide) and pass out to your group.

Questions for Group

This lesson might be best run with a straight discussion of the questions, rather than the usual "encouraged journaling" as a preliminary. Participants who are not accustomed to seeing God at work may have skeptical feelings or strong reactions to be discussed.

First read both MPJ and the following stories out loud. Use the questions (p. 54 of this guide) either to pass out or to stimulate group discussion as needed.

Miracles in Mylar*

God's Promise

In April, 2003, my family was reading a brief reflection over Easter weekend that triggered a comment. The author pointed out the absence of miracles during the Passion of Christ; the greatest miracle in history happened on an ordinary day, with people doing ordinary routines. The message was to look for God in the ordinary, everyday parts of our lives. That's when Melissa said, "Mom, the balloon!"

"What balloon?"

"The balloon from my birthday. It's a rainbow! Didn't you realize it?" My daughter stared at me in disbelief at my density and ignorance.

No, the significance of the balloon had never occurred to me. The balloon had been one of many given to Melissa for her 18th birthday, September 27, 2002, only 21 days following her diagnosis of cancer, at the beginning of her chemotherapy treatments. All the other balloons gradually deflated after a month or two, even the ones that were much larger and the dolphin that had the same shape. But one balloon remained stubbornly afloat, through Christmas decorations, past Valentine's Day, and now through Easter. It had long been secured to our upstairs banister railing to keep it out of the way. I passed it multiple times as I flew through a day, frequently marveling with atheistic curiosity at how that thing still managed to stay up. Only my daughter had the eyes of faith to see it as God's concrete reassurance that Christ was walking with us every step of this journey: a rainbow, the symbol of God's promise (Genesis 9:8-17). I have since begun to pray for such eyesight, that I may see all the fingerprints of God delicately embedded in our daily existence.

"Wouldn't it be neat if the rainbow stayed up until the end of my treatments?" Melissa added, anticipating June 17, 2003. And it did.

Answer to Prayer

That same summer, July 2003, Melissa's Dad embarked on a mission's trip to the jungles of the Amazon that sounded quite frightening. Unknown to me, Melissa was terrified for her Dad, and prayed furiously for his safety. She was spending the July weekend in New Hampshire at her boyfriend's parents house. On Saturday morning, the rainbow balloon, now diminished to waist-knee level, came bouncing into the kitchen right up to me as I sat at the table, like a dog seeking to be patted. It was the first time that the balloon had left its upstairs post all year, although we had freed it from its tether a few weeks earlier, once it started to lose buoyancy. As the balloon walked into the kitchen, we started joking about it looking for Melissa, and commented on how we should call her and tell her the rainbow was searching for her. I distinctly remember chiding myself for reading too much into a balloon. "It's a balloon, not the Holy Spirit," I thought. I felt foolish calling Melissa. How my heart sinks now to remember that! So we joked, but ignored it. The balloon, on its own, made its way slowly and inconspicuously back up the stairs. Rather than return to its usual position, it drifted down the hallway to Melissa's bedroom (not our bedroom, or Jenna's, both equally or even more easily accessible). There it took its place, like a sentry on duty, right in her open doorway. Its remaining short ribbon just touching the floor like a firm foot. It stood there unmoved for over 24 hours, until she came home late that Sunday night. The minute she saw it, she knew it was the answer to her prayers. Her father would return from his trip safely, which, of course, he did. I cost my daughter an extra day of worry by neglecting the ever so subtle call of the Holy Spirit, the whisper of God.

By Janice Bell Meisenhelder © 2004

4-b. Understanding our Faith: Miracles!

Read MPJ, p. 20 - 21 and Miracles in Mylar

1. What strikes you about Melissa's prayer and this story of its answer?
2. What action does Melissa's Mom regret not taking?
3. What do you think of the idea of God using a balloon to communicate to someone?
4. Have you ever seen or heard God working in someone's life in a real way?
5. Are there everyday "miracles" that you can see in your life?

[This page or these questions may be reproduced for group use]

Key Points to Emphasize:

- * God can speak to us in a million different ways, through everyday things and people in our lives.*
- * We can easily miss the signs by being afraid of seeming foolish or just refusing to believe that God would want to speak to us.*
- * Faith is a gift. As we ask God for more faith, we will find our eyes of faith developing the ability to see the fingerprints of God all around us.*

Related Scripture: Read page 74 & 75, MPJ.

- * God loves us so much that even the angels are commanded to guard and watch over us.*

Closing Prayer:

Awesome God, We praise you for caring about us so much that you send your angels to take care of us! Yet, we are so limited and trapped in time and space, we can't see all the ways you act in our lives. Help us to expand our faith so that we can see you working in every day of our lives. Help us to have the eyes of faith to see your work (and workers) everywhere. We pray in the name of your Son and our Healer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

5. Sharing Our Faith

- a. Reaching Out to Others**
- b. Prayer Partners**

5-a. Sharing Our Faith: **Reaching Out to Others**

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, You call us to share our faith, but it is so hard to do! Help us to see you so clearly in our lives and be so filled with your joy that we can't contain it, for you are our Power-Source and Joy-Giver! In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction:

Melissa was very focused on her friends. In the last months of her life, she continually sought ways to bring them closer to God. She wanted to be sure that her dear friends would be with her in heaven. The first of today's entries describes her call from God to witness to her church. The second of today's readings are more lists than prayers. As Melissa's prayers became constant, she used her prayer journal to list her prayer requests, her messages from God, and blessings.

Read: Pages 36-37, 41, 56 & 71, of MPJ.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Follow the same instructions listed on pages 18-19 in this guide, using the following questions. Allow participants to jot down answers and continue with open discussion.

5-a. Sharing our faith: Reaching out to others

Read MPJ, pages 36-37, 41, 56 & 71.

1. What are some of the things that Melissa is doing to try to encourage her friends about God?

2. Why did she care so much?

3. What makes it so hard to talk about our faith?

4. Where or how can we begin to share our faith with others? What are the beginning steps?

[This page or these questions may be reproduced for group use]

Key Points to Emphasize:

** Melissa talks about “witnessing”, meaning talking to her friends about all that God has done for her. (Some names were deleted for privacy reason).*

** She gave her friends daily devotional books just like the one she used and talked to them about the lessons.*

**She took them to Christian Rock concerts, i.e. Jars of Clay concert (note on page 56, MPJ).*

** She made gifts with scripture texts.*

** She allowed her friends to hear her praying with Jamie over the phone.*

** But most of all, she prayed for them. When we pray for others, we are giving an invisible gift of our love and concern by bringing them to the throne of grace.*

Related Scripture: Read MPJ, Page 72.

** How is our faith encouraged by others?*

** How do we learn about God from others?*

** Have you ever thought about God calling you by name?*

Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, It is sometimes more than we can believe to think we are precious in your sight! Help us to feel the full impact of your love for us, so that we may share all that you do in our lives with those we love. Thank you for the power of your Holy Spirit to guide and inspire us. May we grow ever stronger in our ability to listen and follow our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

5-b. Sharing Our Faith: **Prayer Partners**

Opening Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the gift of friendship and fellowship. Thank you for giving us each other to encourage and love. Be with us this hour and help us to hear your voice through Melissa, through each other, and through your Word, Our Best Friend and Perfect Life Partner. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Introduction:

Melissa met with a friend every week for prayer. The two would meet privately and share their prayer requests (fears, worries, good things), and then pray together.

Melissa asked this friend to be her prayer partner because Melissa wanted more support and Christian fellowship, someone with which to grow in faith. But in the process of praying together, these young college women also became very close friends. The people we pray with usually do become our closest friends.

Read: Pages 26- 27, MPJ– Out loud.

Questions for Group

Pass out the following questions, as instructed on page 18-19 of this guide, or use them to stimulate discussion, depending on the group.

Key Points To Emphasize:

♥ *Christianity is a community faith. One cannot be a Christian alone: we all need each other.*

♥ *A Prayer Partner is someone with whom we can develop a trusting relationship and be ourselves- a friend to share our doubts, confusion, fears and even failures.*

♥ *God uses such prayer friendships to meet our needs: solve problems, be supported, feel loved!*

Related Scripture: Read MPJ, page 48-49

* *What does God promise us in these verses?*

* *Where did Melissa find these verses that meant so much to her and encouraged her?*

* *Do you have someone you can pray with or share a scripture verse with or ask for prayer support?*

Closing Prayer:

O God of comfort and companionship, Thank you for placing us in a community, calling us to band together in our faith, encouraging us to pray together for support and growth, and allowing us to hear your Word and feel your Spirit. Be with us as we leave this place. Let the actions to which we are called remain in our hearts and give us the strength to obey, Our Lover of our Soul and Master of our Lives. In Jesus, Our Lord and Savior, we pray. Amen.

Note on Final Session:

If you have worked on MPJ for an extended period of time, either as a series or as a retreat, it is important to close your time together. This is likely best done with a worship service. This could include prayer, song, music, readings, meditation, sacrament, or other liturgical elements. Be creative to think of ways to honor and recognize all that the participants have experienced, shared, and learned. And be sure to consider and name how this experience will be integrated going forward! Finally, thanksgiving and blessing for going forth should be lifted up!

Blessings in this and all your ministry with
Melissa's Prayer Journal!

Ben Davis

Give the gift of Faith:

Let the power of Melissa's
REAL-Life Witness
Touch the hearts of people in
your life today!

Additional copies of

Melissa's Prayer Journal

Are available at **Wholesale Prices** (\$9.95)
plus **FREE SHIPPING!!**

Order Conveniently from our website:

WWW.MBMPUBLISHERS.COM

Or send a check or money order to:

MBM Publishers
62 Beechwood Road, Suite 102
Wellesley, MA 02482

