

Praying the hours*

In the Jewish tradition, the oldest fixed daily prayer is the beautiful Shema (Deut. 6:4-5). The Shema, an assertion of faith in One God, is recited when rising in the morning and upon retiring at night. When the early Christians began to detach themselves from Judaism, they kept the practice of praying at fixed times of the day.

These hours are important archetypal images of the rhythm and movement of the day. The wisdom of pausing at these sacred times is a treasure that ought not be lost.

Understandably, you may not be able to consciously pray the seven hours every day. One way to approach these hours would be to make a cognizant choice about which hour you will focus on each day. This would be a time for you to intentionally pause from your work and remember the spirit of the hour.

Office of Readings (Matins)

early morning/middle of night:

Traditionally, this hour was prayed in the heart of the night. However, due to the fragility of the human condition, it is understandable that in many communities Matins was moved to the early morning hours when it was still dark. It became a pre-dawn prayer.

Pray Matins:

*My soul yearns for you, O God.

God says, "I keep vigil with you through the night."

*Psalm 42

O Guardian of our lives,
Through our joys and our sorrows, you keep watch. Through our days and our nights, you keep watch. Through the passing of our years, you keep watch. In our youth and our aging, you keep watch. Through the passing of our years, you keep watch. In our destruction of the earth and in our caring for the earth, you keep watch. In the midst of our violence, in the midst of our peace, you keep watch. In the seasons of our hearts, you keep watch. Through the seasons of our years, you keep watch. Teach us, like you, to keep watch. Give us vigilant hearts.

Psalm 63:1, Amen.

Morning prayer (Lauds)

This early morning hour, ideally prayed at sunrise, is the first of the day hours and has praise and resurrection as its central themes.

Pray Lauds:

Set the clock of your heart for dawn's arrival.

God says, "Taste the joy of being awake."

Psalm 19

As new light streams out of the darkness, we open wide our hearts to the healing light of your encircling presence. Open our eyes to the opportunities this day has to offer. Surprise us with small joys and pieces of beauty scattered through the hours. O Beautiful Presence, help us this day to taste the joy of being awake. May this simple prayer come true in our lives today. Amen.

Psalm 90:14, Amen.

Prayer during the day— Before noon (Terce)

This brief pause opens our hearts to receive the Spirit's gifts. We invite the Spirit into our work as we pause to remember the noble nature of work.

Pray Terce:

Oh Great God of love,

work through me that I may be your love poured out.

Psalm 67

The Fresh beginnings of this day embrace us as we stop for this midmorning pause. Bless the work that awaits us. Anoint our hands, hearts, and minds as we joyfully enter into the heart of this day. Make our spirits lucid, attentive, and open to all that can be. Breathe on us and strengthen us for our pilgrimage through the day. In Christ's name we pray.

"Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes." –Etty Hillesum

Amen.

Midday (Sext)

This is the hour of light. The sun, having reached its peak in the heavens, illuminates all things. This is the hour of courage, recommitment, and passion.

Pray Sext:

In this hour of the noonday sun, let us bow to each other and pray for peace.

Let us, each one, be peace.

Psalm 24

Oh God of light, shine on me at this noonday hour. Rejuvenate and invigorate me. Renew my commitment to the tasks of this day. Lead me to my courage. Warm what has grown cold in me. Energize all that has become lethargic. Enliven my growing moments. In the middle of this day help me to stand before my life with an open heart.

Matthew 5:13-14, Amen.

Afternoon (None)

As day moves toward evening with wisdom in its wings, this is the hour to reflect on impermanence, aging, death, and transition.

Pray None:

We stand before the dying day offering our bouquet of life.

Psalm 71

As the shadows lengthen, search my heart for any traces of bitterness. Reveal to me all that keeps me from living with a free and unburdened heart. Empty me of all that is false and binding. Let me walk into the twilight hour of this day with gratitude. May I be liberated from all resentments. O searcher of hearts, at the end of this day present me as a gift for the entire world. May it be so.

Psalm 90:12, Amen.

Vespers or Evensong

In this twilight hour it is time to move from the tumult of the day into the quiet of evening.

Pray Vespers:

My eyes scan the horizons of your goodness, the incense of gratitude rises as an evening prayer.

Psalm 34

Come, sit at our table. Be present in the bread we break and share. It is our daily bread lifted out of both grace and struggle. It is the bread of compassion and joy, sorrow and courage. We bless you who have journeyed with us through the hours of this day. Now it is evening, and the day is almost spent. Come to our supper table. Be our guest. Let us see your face in each of our table companions. At this Vespers hour light the lamps of our hearts and attend our deepest hungers. May it be so!

Psalm 42:8, Amen

Compline or night prayer

This is the last hour of the day. In this night hour we are a bit more subjective, turning our thoughts inward. It is time to review your day by means of a gentle evaluation of your faithfulness as a pilgrim during the hours.

Pray Compline:

O Holy One, in whose light and shadows we have journeyed through this day, give us now a peaceful night and when our lives have ripened, a happy death!

Psalm 23

Let your comforting darkness embrace us this night. The beautiful prayer of this day is complete. This day's pilgrimage is ending, and we hold dear the lessons of the hours. Night has fallen. Breathe us into this good night. Calm our hearts. Comfort our souls. Protect us from danger. Fill us with well-being. Anoint us with your loving protection. Receive our prayer. Amen.

Psalm 4:8, Amen