

I Heard
God
Laugh

STUDY GUIDE

Table of Contents

- Introduction 1
- Study Guide Purpose and Format 2
- Best Practices 3
- The Prayer Process 4
- SESSION 1:**
Let's Start Here 5
- SESSION 2:**
The Unexpected Life 6
- SESSION 3:**
My Spiritual Journey 8
- SESSION 4:**
Life's Essential Habit 10
- SESSION 5:**
Six Powerful Spiritual Lessons 11
- SESSION 6:**
The God Who Gave Us Laughter 12
- SESSION 7:**
Walk Together 14

Introduction

Something brought you here. Maybe a friend invited you. You might have been intrigued by the title of the book. Does God really laugh? Have others heard him? How can I hear him too? Or maybe you have this feeling that something is missing in your life. In many ways you are flourishing, but in other ways you are experiencing dissatisfaction. We all feel dissatisfied at one point or another.

God is speaking to you through that dissatisfaction.

This is the invitation of a lifetime. For you to flourish and thrive like never before.

You're a human being, made up of two parts: a body and a soul. Your soul plays a part in every aspect of your life—physically, emotionally, intellectually—but, just like your body, you have to take care of your soul. When your body is hungry, your stomach growls. Your soul can't growl when it's hungry. It's time to start paying more attention to your soul.

And what's the best way to get in touch with your soul's needs? Prayer!

This study guide is just that: a guide to help you encounter God in a powerful way and to help you start a habit of daily prayer. Our hope is that, by reading this book and going deeper with this guide, you truly learn how to pray.

As you begin this journey, ask God to help you desire the transformation only he can help bring about. Our aim here is to not know everything about prayer, but rather that you have a powerful experience of prayer over the next six weeks. We are grateful for your willingness to respond to this profound invitation, join intentionally with others in your parish (or experience this guide on your own), and seek answers to your deeply personal questions.

The Catholic Church needs people like you doing things like this. Thank you, God bless and good luck!

Study Guide

Purpose and Format

The purpose of this study guide is to: (a) help you delve further into *I Heard God Laugh* by exploring your personal prayer journal, your reaction to Matthew's insights, and your own attempts to apply what you've learned to your life; and (b) build authentic community in the parish by allowing discussion about the book's themes. This guide was written for small groups and book clubs, but can be used by individuals as well.

The study guide is broken into seven sessions. These sessions can take place once a week or once a month, at the discretion of the group.

Each session follows the same format:

- Opening Prayer
- Read Aloud
- Discussion Questions
- Activities
- For Next Time
- Closing Prayer

We recommend that a group session last from **sixty to ninety minutes**, but the content is flexible and can be adapted to fit your needs. It is assumed that participants will have completed the reading assignment before attending each session, except for the first session.

Best Practices

Never led a small group? Don't sweat it! Here are five tips for creating a great environment for small groups!

1. Keep your meeting time and place consistent. Once a week, at a time convenient for all participants, in a location that has accessible parking is great.

2. Communicate in advance. If you're meeting at someone's house, let people know beforehand where they can park. If you're meeting virtually, make sure everyone has the correct software installed.

3. Get to know each other. Even if you have already been meeting for some time, it can be beneficial to begin your time together as a group with a fun, lighthearted question. Starting sessions this way helps individuals get to know each other a little and feel more comfortable together. Here are some fun suggestions:

- Which fictional character would you want to be your best friend?
- If you could eliminate one food so no one could eat it ever again, what would you destroy?
- If you could live anywhere in the world for a year, where would it be?
- What is your favorite, funniest, or most awkward childhood memory?
- What is the last movie you saw in theaters?

4. Allow room for silence. It's okay if there are moments of quiet in the group. It may feel uncomfortable or awkward, but people need time to process or to summon the courage to speak up.

5. Begin and end with prayer. Start every session with the opening prayer (found at the beginning of each section), and close each session with the closing prayer (found at the end of each session). You can also give people the opportunity to offer personal prayer intentions.

The Prayer Process

For years, Matthew encouraged people to commit to a habit of daily prayer. Over time he realized they needed more than encouragement. They needed to be taught how to pray and they needed a method of prayer.

And so he created the Prayer Process (found in Part Three of *I Heard God Laugh*). This simple, seven-step method of prayer can be used by anyone, anywhere, at any time, regardless of your experience in the spiritual life—and it is designed to grow with you. You will experience the Prayer Process together throughout this study guide, but we encourage you to start using it in your daily life too!

1. Gratitude: Begin by thanking God in a personal dialogue for whatever you are most grateful for today.

2. Awareness: Revisit the times in the past twenty-four hours when you were and were not the-best-version-of-yourself. Talk to God about these situations and what you learned from them.

3. Significant Moments: Identify something you experienced today and explore what God might be trying to say to you through that event (or person).

4. Peace: Ask God to forgive you for any wrong you have committed (against yourself, another person, or him) and to fill you with a deep and abiding peace.

5. Freedom: Speak with God about how he is inviting you to change your life, so that you can experience the freedom to be the-best-version-of-yourself.

6. Others: Lift up to God anyone you feel called to pray for today, asking God to bless and guide them.

7. Finish: Pray the Our Father.

SESSION 1:

Let's Start Here

Opening Prayer

Dear God, as we begin this small group experience, we ask that you open our minds and our hearts. Help us to grow in relationship with you and with each other. Bless this group. Inspire us to pour ourselves into this book and the ideas it presents. Encourage us to persevere, even when it's inconvenient or difficult. Thy will be done. Amen.

Ice Breaker

Say who you are, how long you've been at the parish, and answer one or two of the "Get to Know Each Other" questions.

Discussion Questions

Question 1: How would you rate the health of your soul 1-10? Where would you like to be? What do you do to intentionally take care of your soul?

Question 2: What do you think of when you hear the word **prayer**? Write down some different prayers that you learned as a kid, or some different ways to pray. Discuss as a group.

Question 3: If you had to pick three words to describe God in this moment what would they be? Write them down and share with the group. The leader can give examples if needed. How do you address God? Is He Father, Lord, Dad, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Wisdom, King of Kings, etc? If you don't have a specific name that's OK. Is there a certain person of the Trinity that resonates with you?

Activities

Pick someone else in the group (or the leader can assign them beforehand if there's an odd number of people) to be your **prayer partner**. You will connect with this person to swap prayer intentions during each session.

For Next Time

Read Part One of *I Heard God Laugh*. What stands out to you? Highlight or make note of the ideas that most resonate with you.

Closing Prayer

Allow people to offer personal intentions and then pray one *Our Father*, three *Hail Marys*, and one *Glory Be*.

SESSION 2:

The Unexpected Life

Opening Prayer

Soul Note from *I Heard God Laugh* Part One:

Soul, You have the heart of a lion, strong and courageous. Let nothing distract you, let nobody discourage you from your daily communion with the one who created you. Amen.

Read Aloud

Ask someone from the group to read this passage from Part One of *I Heard God Laugh*. Start on the bottom of page 10 with, “At the beginning of a journey...” and end with “I pray you are blessed with an abundance of courage, patience, and wisdom for the journey we are embarking on.” on page 11. Reflect on that for a moment. Then discuss what sticks out to you.

Discussion Questions

Question 1: Matthew says that some dreams we had when we were younger were ill suited for us, and we were ill suited for them. Can you think of a dream you had or something that you really wanted when you were younger, but are glad it didn't come to be?

Question 2: What do you remember being taught about prayer?

- Did you learn prayers in school? At home? Did anyone teach you how to pray?

Question 3: Matthew says in the book “In prayer

we learn how to love and be loved, because we discover that we have been loved, are loved, and will continually be loved by God.” How have you experienced the love of God? Do you believe that God loves you as Matthew describes?

- Share a story of someone who loves unconditionally like God does in your own life.

Question 4: We each experience storms in our lives; how have you weathered storms in the past? After reading this part of the book, how do you think you will handle storms in the future?

- So often we think that we can fix the storms in our own lives by just burrowing down from the wind and the rain. But if we have strong roots we will endure the storm. Do you feel like your faith has strong roots?

Activities

Do *Lectio Divina* on the Bible passage below (which Matthew mentions in the book). *Lectio Divina* stands for “Divine Reading”. Ask three people to take turns reading the passage slowly, with a minute of silence in between for the group to reflect.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.

And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my boy over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury.

It does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing.

For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things.

At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.

So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

- Is there a word or phrase that sticks out to you? What do you feel that God is trying to say to you through this passage?
- After reading the passage and taking a minute of silence, ask the group to share anything that sticks out to them. Repeat this twice more.

For Next Time

Pass out Prayer Process Cards and encourage everyone to at least try this method of prayer a couple of times this week.

Read Part Two of *I Heard God Laugh*. What stands out to you? Highlight or make note of the ideas that most resonate with you.

Closing Prayer

Allow people to offer personal intentions and then pray one *Our Father*, three *Hail Marys*, and one *Glory Be*.

SESSION 3:

My Spiritual Journey

Opening Prayer

Soul Note from *I Heard God Laugh* Part Two:

Soul, Set the worries of this world aside and allow yourself to soar like a bird on the wind. Listen to the whispers of your Creator calling you gently to you, inviting you to remember that just as the body needs food, so too your soul needs to be nourished. Amen.

Read Aloud

Ask someone from the group to read this passage from Part Two of *I Heard God Laugh*. Start on page 23 with, “God, what do you think I should do?” and read to the bottom of the page.

Discussion Questions

Question 1: Who is someone you’ve gone to advice for in the past?

- Did their advice help you?
- Do you go to God with these concerns, asking for advice and guidance? Why or why not? Do you want to?

Question 2: When did your spiritual journey begin? Was it at a conference, an event, through a mentor, a family member?

- Is there a moment when you encountered God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit in a powerful way? Think about it as a transformation in one’s life that redefines your mission or purpose. Share about your experience of conversion.

Question 3: When was the last time, if ever, that you asked the question: God, what do you think I should do?

Question 4: Matthew’s high school motto was *Lucaet Lux Vestra* or “Let your light shine.” Do you have a motto for your life? If so, what is it and how did you develop it?

Question 5: Matthew says that when God invites us to trust in him, he promises that everything will work out in the end, but he doesn’t promise that everything will work out the way we want it to.

- Is there a time you have seen that happen in your life? Share with the group.
- It has been said that God answers prayers in 3 ways: 1) Yes, 2) Not yet, 3) I have something better for you. How do you interpret that thought?

Activities

Write a thank you note to someone who has impacted your faith journey in a significant way. If you don’t necessarily have someone who has impacted you spiritually, write a thank you note to a mentor or coach who has significantly impacted your life in a positive way.

Make a gratitude list of all the things that you are grateful for. This is just for you, you don’t have to share this with the group.

Write down a prayer to God about something that is worrying you.

For Next Time

Read Part Three of *I Heard God Laugh*. What stands out to you? Highlight or make note of the ideas that most resonate with you.

Closing Prayer

The Prayer of Transformation
(from *Rediscover Jesus*)

Loving Father,

Here I am. I trust that you have an incredible plan for me. Transform me. Transform my life. Everything is on the table.

Take what you want to take and give what you want to give. Transform me into the person you created me to be, so I can live the life you envision for me. I hold nothing back; I am 100 percent available. How can I help? Amen.

SESSION 4:

Life's Essential Habit

Opening Prayer

Soul Note from *I Heard God Laugh* Part Three:

Soul, Come to the silence and learn what it is that you need to thrive. Embrace what it is that makes you dance for joy. And share with everyone you meet the love that Love himself has filled you with. Amen.

Read Aloud

Ask someone from the group to read this passage from Part Three of *I Heard God Laugh*. Start on page 42 with, “One of the real treasures the Prayer Process offers” and read until the middle of page 43 that ends with “It’s time to wake up!”

Discussion Questions

Question 1: Questions play an important role in our spiritual journey. If you could ask God for one thing right now, what would it be?

Question 2: Matthew says, “The Prayer Process requires no mentor, no guide, and no instructions.” Have you tried praying with it by now (Prayer Process Cards were handed out two sessions ago with no instructions). How did it go?

Question 3: How do your best days start? What are the habits you have created that if you don’t do, the day just doesn’t go as smoothly?

- Maybe it’s a run, prayer, a morning cup of coffee. Share with the group.

- How could your morning routine become better?

Question 4: If you had to pick three words to describe God in this moment what would they be?

- This was a discussion question from Session One. Have these words changed since then? Why or why not?

Activities

What obstacles have you encountered while building your daily habit of prayer? Share with the group. Brainstorm how you can overcome these obstacles together.

Write down the What, When, Where, How, and Why of the basics of building a vibrant daily prayer life (found on pg. 49 and 50 of *I Heard God Laugh*).

For Next Time

Read Part Four of *I Heard God Laugh*. What stands out to you? Highlight or make note of the ideas that most resonate with you.

Closing Prayer

Spend the last ten minutes of your group time together going through the Prayer Process step by step.

SESSION 5:

Six Powerful Spiritual Lessons

Opening Prayer

Soul Note from *I Heard God Laugh* Part Four:

Soul, As you stumble and fumble onward toward ecstasy, learn to listen to the voice of the one who created you. He speaks gently to you throughout the day, and delights in those moments when you sit with him in solitude. Amen.

Read Aloud

Ask someone from the group to read this passage from Part Four of *I Heard God Laugh*. Start on page 75 with, “Every honest human activity can be transformed into prayer.” and read to the end of the first paragraph on page 76 that ends with “ Guide God around your life.” Reflect on that for a moment and then discuss what sticks out to you.

Discussion Questions

Question 1: Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? What was that experience like? If not, what do you imagine is the purpose of a pilgrimage? Where would you like to go? Why?

Question 2: Let’s talk about the Six Seismic Shifts. They are: *Begin the Conversation, Ask God What He Wants, Give Yourself to Prayer, Transform Everything into Prayer, Make Yourself Available* and *Just Keep Showing Up*. Does one of these resonate with you more than the others? Which seismic shift do you feel you are experiencing right now?

Question 3: Matthew says that we “need so much less than we think we do.” And that often we take spiritual detours by filling our lives with stuff. Reflect on one thing you could remove from your life to help make yourself available to God. Share with your prayer partner so they can help hold you accountable!

Question 4: Matthew muses that the spiritual life is not a straight line. Have you experienced that in your own journey? Share with the group.

Question 5: Can you name a time when God has answered your prayers? What was that experience like? Now reflect upon a time when it felt like God hadn’t answered your prayers. How was that different? What did you feel?

Activities

Make a list of how you can transform your everyday activities into prayer.

- Examples: mowing the lawn, having dinner with your family, commuting to work is prayer.

Make yourself available to God this week: Go to church outside of Sunday Mass to pray.

For Next Time

Read Part Five of *I Heard God Laugh*. What stands out to you? Highlight or make note of the ideas that most resonate with you.

Closing Prayer

Spend the last ten minutes of your group time going through the Prayer Process step by step.

SESSION 6:

The God Who Gave Us Laughter

Opening Prayer

Soul Note from *I Heard God Laugh* Part Five:

Soul, Until you discover God's playfulness you will not enter into the depths of the spiritual life. Until you discover the playfulness of the child within, you will not discover the playfulness of God. Dance in the rain, play in the mud, lose track of time, and maybe then you will find yourself lost in God, and found once and for all. Amen.

Read Aloud

Ask someone from the group to read this passage from Part Five of *I Heard God Laugh*. Start on page 90 with, "Modern medicine has discovered that laughter strengthens your immune system," and read to the top of 91 ending with "Does God have a sense of humor." Reflect on this passage

Discussion Questions

Question 1: Matthew says in the book "The more we get to know God, the more we desire to know him." Have you experienced that since we started this journey together? Can you think of a specific moment in this journey?

Question 2: Matthew doesn't promise that you will hear God laugh, but he says he can show you how to wait patiently and ready yourself for an unforgettable encounter with God.

- Name a time when you really had to be patient. Maybe it is a memory from childhood, or your teenage years. Maybe it was waiting for a dream to come true, or a prayer to be answered.

Question 3: Think about the intentional conversation Matthew has with his daughter Isabel in this chapter.

- When is the last time you took the time to have an intentional conversation with someone you love? Share with the group. (Note: you don't have to disclose confidential information. However, you can share the period of time, who it was, and how it felt to really dive deep in conversation with that person.)
- Has this study group and your last few weeks of daily prayer helped change your relationship between you and God? Have you been able to perceive your times in prayer as an intentional conversation with God, a father who delights in you, his child? Why or why not?

Question 4: Busy is not your friend. It makes us feel burnt out, overwhelmed and inadequate.

- Matthew says there is a difference between being busy with the right things and being busy with the wrong things. Name a time when you had a busy day filled with the right things.

How did you feel? Did you feel proud, accomplished, satisfied?

- Matthew talks about how he decides what events and commitments to participate in. Do you have a way of discerning what to be involved with? Or do you say yes to every opportunity? Do you feel pressured into doing things? Do you feel like you have the freedom to say no?
 - » Do you think Matthew's approach to considering adding things to your schedule or taking them away could work for you? Discuss as a group.
 - » What is one commitment you currently have that is life-giving? What is one commitment that is draining?

Activities

In Luke 5: 1-11, Peter is called to trust in the Lord to catch fish and then to leave his belongings and follow him. Read the following passage three times and reflect on how the Lord may be asking you to trust him more than you did yesterday.

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch."

Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at

your command I will lower the nets."

When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing.

They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."

When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him.

Go through your next week's schedule in regards to commitment. Use Matthew's process to help you gain clarity.

- Do I feel free to say no?
- How will I feel on the way to this commitment?
- How will I feel while I am there?
- How will I feel on my way home?

For Next Time

Read Part Six of *I Heard God Laugh*. What stands out to you? Highlight or make note of the ideas that most resonate with you.

Closing Prayer

Spend the last ten minutes of your group time together going through the Prayer Process step by step.

SESSION 7:

Walk Together

Opening Prayer

Dear God, as we finish this small group experience, we ask that you continue to open our minds and our hearts. Help us to keep showing up and meeting you in prayer. Encourage us to persevere, even when it's inconvenient or difficult. Thank you for all the blessings you poured into our small group. Amen.

Read Aloud

Ask someone from the group to read this passage from the Epilogue of *I Heard God Laugh* on page 111.

Discussion Questions

Question 1: What surprised you the most about this book?

Question 2: How are you doing with your daily habit of prayer? What graces have you received? What obstacles have you overcome? What obstacles may you encounter on the road that you can prepare for now that you have read this book?

Question 3: Who are you going to share this daily habit of prayer with? How will you share why they should pray/why you pray?

Closing Prayer

Spend the last ten minutes of your group time together going through the Prayer Process step by step.



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