

Session 3 · Two Prayers, One Answer

Tobit 3:7-17 · Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Participants will discover the hinge of the whole book: on the same day, three hundred miles apart, two desperate people pray, and heaven hears both prayers the very hour they are prayed and answers them with a single plan, one angel dispatched to heal them both. They will feel the shift as the narrator takes the reader behind the curtain while every character remains in the dark.

Catholic Touchstone. The theology of prayer and providence: God hears, God answers before we see it, and his answer is usually one weave where we asked for two separate threads. This session also requires the Church's pastoral heart, because Sarah's story touches despair, and the Catholic response to despair is compassion, hope, and real help, never shame.

What You Need to Know

At 3:7 the book does something structurally bold: it leaves Tobit mid-anguish and cuts to a new character in a new country. In Ecbatana of Media lives Sarah, daughter of Raguel, and her affliction outmatches Tobit's. Seven times she has been given in marriage; seven times the demon Asmodeus has killed the bridegroom before the marriage could be consummated. On this day her father's maids taunt her with it, calling her the killer of her husbands and telling her they hope never to see a child of hers. The text says she was deeply grieved and thought of ending her life, and then tells us exactly what stops her: the thought of her father, the grief and shame her death would bring down on his gray head. She chooses instead to take her anguish to God, and prays at her window, hands spread, a posture that ancient readers and commentators have long connected with the exile's prayer toward Jerusalem, though the text names only the window.

Handle Sarah with the Church's own tenderness. Some of your participants know her interior landscape from the inside, and how you speak in this hour will teach them what the Church thinks of people in despair. Three notes. First, the text itself honors her: her turn from self-destruction is not shamed as weakness but presented as love, the tether of her father's face. Second, the Catechism is explicit that grave anguish and suffering can diminish responsibility, and that we are not to despair of the eternal salvation of those who have died this way; the Church prays for them and entrusts them to the mercy of God (CCC 2282-2283). Third, be prepared, without announcing it dramatically, to stay after the session for anyone who lingers, and to help any participant in real darkness connect with your pastor or other competent help. You are a Bible study leader, not a counselor, and knowing that boundary is part of loving your group well.

Then read 3:16-17 until you feel its weight: the prayer of both was heard in the presence of the glory of the great God, and Raphael was sent to heal the two of them. This is the sentence the whole study is named for. Two prayers, prayed the same day by strangers who will never meet, are received as one case and answered with one agent. Raphael, whose name means God heals, is dispatched with a double commission the reader is told in full: to remove the white films from Tobit's eyes and to give Sarah to Tobias, binding the demon. From this verse forward, the reader knows everything and the characters know nothing, and that gap is where the book will live for the next six chapters. The dramatic irony is not a storytelling trick; it is the book's doctrine of providence, drawn to scale. We are the characters.

Someone reading our story from heaven's side would see what we cannot: the answer already on the road.

OT Roots and Fulfillment

Sarah praying at the window recalls a precise tradition of exiles orienting themselves toward Jerusalem: Solomon asked at the temple's dedication that when your people pray toward this place, God would hear from heaven (1 Kings 8:44-45, 48-49), and Daniel in Babylon kept windows open toward Jerusalem and prayed three times a day at the risk of the lions' den (Daniel 6:10). Exiles orient their bodies toward the promise. Her rescue also joins the Bible's long ledger of barren and grieved women heard by God, Hannah weeping in the temple chief among them (1 Samuel 1:10-20), a ledger that runs forward to Elizabeth, whose long-prayed prayer Gabriel announces has been heard (Luke 1:13), and opens at last onto the Annunciation, where the angel comes not to a barren wife but to a virgin, and God's answer outruns even the asking.

The fulfillment lines run deep. Raphael sent from the presence of the glory of God anticipates Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God and is sent to Zechariah and Mary (Luke 1:19, 26). The simultaneous hearing of two prayers as one case anticipates the New Testament's confidence that before they call I will answer, and your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Isaiah 65:24; Matthew 6:8). And the healing that comes disguised, walking on human feet, unrecognized by those it saves, is a shape your group should slowly begin to find familiar: it is the road to Emmaus, five sessions early. Say nothing; let them discover it in Session 5.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

Origen · *On Prayer 11 (c. AD 233)*

Origen, among the most learned teachers of the early Church, cites this very scene as proof that the angels are not spectators of our prayer: Raphael himself receives and presents the petitions of Tobit and Sarah before the Holy One. When we pray, Origen says, we are never praying alone; heaven's ministers carry our words up and God's answers down. Session 10 will meet this claim again on the lips of the angel himself.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Damascene · *On the Orthodox Faith 3.24 (c. AD 740)*

The Damascene gives the Church her classic definition, the one the Catechism still quotes: prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God. Notice how much that definition permits. Tobit's plea to die and Sarah's anguish at the window both qualify fully; what makes prayer is not composure but address. Both prayers rise, and both are heard.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Francis de Sales · *Introduction to the Devout Life 4.13-14 (1609)*

The gentle Doctor teaches that seasons of desolation, when prayer feels useless and heaven feels shut, are not evidence of God's absence but a normal weather of the interior life, to be met with patience, humble perseverance, and refusal of despair, because God often works most in the soul precisely when the soul feels least. Sarah at her window, praying with no evidence that anyone is listening, while the answer is already being commissioned, is his teaching in a single picture.

Catechism Connection

CCC 2559 opens the Catechism's whole treatment of prayer with the Damascene's definition and adds that humility is the foundation of prayer; both prayers in this chapter rise from the bottom. CCC 2282-2283 give the Church's mind on suicide with both clarity and mercy: grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear can diminish responsibility, and we should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives, for God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance by ways known to him alone. CCC 391 and 395 teach that Satan and the demons are fallen angels, real personal beings, whose power is nonetheless not infinite and operates only within God's permission, the exact frame in which Asmodeus appears and will be defeated. CCC 302-303 teach that creation is carried by providence toward its perfection, with God at work in the concrete details of history, which is 3:16-17 stated as doctrine.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

- 1. The works of God, hidden.** Tonight this thread changes state: hidden from the characters, revealed to the reader. From now on the group reads every scene with double vision. Cultivate it deliberately, and never use the phrase the works of God; the angel owns that line in Session 10.
- 2. Prayer heard in silence.** Planted in Tobit's unanswered prayer last week, this thread now flowers in secret: both prayers are heard the same day, and neither pray-er will know it for chapters. Providence runs ahead of perception.
- 3. Sealed guess.** Participants wrote their guesses in Session 1 before Sarah existed for them. Tonight they learn there are two prayers to answer, not one. Expect someone to groan that their guess is now too small. Perfect. Say only: Session 8.

Session Goals

1. Participants can retell Sarah's affliction and her prayer, and can articulate why the text presents her turn from self-destruction as an act of love.
2. Participants can state what changes at 3:16-17 and why dramatic irony is the book's doctrine of providence.
3. Participants can give the Catholic account of how Tobit can be inspired and inerrant while written as edifying narrative, in the key of Dei Verbum 12.
4. Participants leave with one concrete practice of praying while the answer is invisible.

Time Note (90 minutes)

Win 10 min · Build 58 min · Send 12 min · Live It and closing prayer 10 min. Sarah's scene (questions 1-3) must not be rushed; budget 20 minutes and watch the room, not the clock. If you are running long, cut in this order: drop the Dig Deeper on Asmodeus, compress question 5 (the window posture) to the Daniel cross-reference alone, and trim the genre steelman's third answer paragraph to its final two sentences.

Two Prayers, One Answer

Tobit 3:7-17 · Discussion Guide · 90 minutes

Opening Prayer

Father, you heard Tobit in Nineveh and Sarah in Ecbatana on the same day, and your answer was on the road before their tears were dry. Hear us tonight. Teach us to pray from wherever we actually are, and to trust that you are already answering in ways we cannot yet see. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win · Opening the Door (10 minutes)

- W1.** How did the honest prayer from last week's Live It go? Did anything about praying without polish surprise you?
- W2.** Think of the longest you have ever waited for an answer to a prayer. While you waited, what story did you tell yourself about why the answer had not come?

Build · Into the Text (58 minutes)

Meanwhile, in Ecbatana

- 1.** Read Tobit 3:7-9. The camera suddenly leaves Tobit and lands on a stranger in another country. Who is Sarah, what has happened to her seven times, and what do the maids' words add to a burden that was already unbearable?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Sarah, daughter of Raguel in Ecbatana of Media, has been given in marriage seven times, and seven times the demon Asmodeus has killed the bridegroom before the marriage could begin. She has lost seven futures and buried seven griefs, and now the household maids taunt her as the killer of her husbands, hoping aloud that she never has a child. The cruelty lands on the exact bruise: not only her losses but the whispered accusation that she is somehow their cause. It is suffering plus slander, Job's wounds plus Job's friends, gathered into one young woman. And note the structural point: the author interrupts Tobit's story to show us that his is not the only prayer rising that day.

- 2.** Read 3:10 with reverence; this verse walks to the very edge. What does Sarah consider, and what exactly stops her? Take the text's answer seriously: what is it saying about what holds a person in their darkest hour?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Sarah, in her grief, thinks of ending her life, and what stops her is a face: her father's. She reasons that her death would bring his gray head down in sorrow, and she will not put that grief on him. The text's answer to the darkest hour is not an argument but a bond; she is held by love, by mattering to someone. That is worth saying plainly and gently in the room: the tethers of love are real anchors, and letting people know they matter to us is not sentiment, it is sometimes rescue. And Sarah's next move is the book's whole theology of prayer in miniature: she carries the anguish itself to God at the window. Leaders, hold this moment with warmth. If it stirs something personal

in the room, receive it without alarm, and make yourself available afterward; the Church meets despair with compassion and real help, never shame (CCC 2282-2283).

3. Read Sarah's prayer, 3:11-15, next to Tobit's from last week (3:2-6). What do the two prayers have in common? Where do they differ? And what does it mean that the book gives a young woman in Media the same full, dignified prayer it gave the patriarch in Nineveh?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Both prayers begin by blessing God, Tobit declaring him righteous in all his ways (3:2), Sarah blessing his holy and honored name (3:11); both are utterly honest about wanting to die; both hand the verdict to God rather than seizing it. Sarah's has its own notes: she defends her innocence, testifies that she is clean of the accusations, and, tellingly, leaves God an open door, asking that if it does not please him to take her life, he would look on her and have mercy so she hears reproach no more. Her prayer bends from death toward mercy as it rises. And the book's egalitarian instinct is worth naming: a grieving young woman's prayer receives the same narrative dignity, the same full quotation, and, as we are about to see, the same-day hearing as the righteous elder's. Heaven's intake desk has no hierarchy of importance.

The Window Toward Jerusalem

4. Back up to the small physical details in 3:11: Sarah prays at the window, hands spread. The text names only the window, but an exile's window had a direction. What tradition might this posture evoke?

Live discovery. Send half the group to 1 Kings 8:44-45 (Solomon dedicating the temple) and half to Daniel 6:10. Three minutes, then report: what tradition is Sarah standing in?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Solomon asked that when the people prayed toward the temple, God would hear from heaven; Daniel, in exile like Sarah, kept his windows open toward Jerusalem and prayed three times daily even when it meant the lions' den. Exiles orient their bodies toward the promise: the direction is a creed you can stand in. The parallels invite us to picture Sarah in Media aiming her whole self at the place of God's presence she has never seen. For Catholics this instinct should feel like home: we are the people of postures, of kneeling and orienting churches and lifting hands, because we believe the body prays too. Ask the group what their bodies currently say about what they believe, and let the question sting a little.

DIG DEEPER

Asmodeus, the demon of 3:8, deserves neither fascination nor dismissal. The Catholic frame is sober: demons are fallen angels, real personal beings, and their power is real but strictly finite, operating only within God's permission and defeated in Christ (CCC 391, 395). Notice how the book handles him: he is never interviewed, never explained, given no scenes of his own, and will be bound by an angel almost without effort in chapter 8. Scripture refuses to make evil interesting. Keep the group's attention where the author keeps his: on the God whose rescue is already moving, not on the enemy whose defeat is already scheduled.

The Hinge of the Whole Book

5. Now read Tobit 3:16-17 aloud twice, and slowly. This is the sentence the entire study hangs on. What exactly does heaven do with these two prayers? List everything the reader now knows that no character knows.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The prayer of both was heard in the presence of the glory of the great God, and Raphael was sent to heal the two of them. Heaven receives two prayers from strangers three hundred miles apart, prayed the same day, and files them as one case with one answer: an angel with a double commission, to remove the white films from Tobit's eyes and to give Sarah in marriage to Tobias, binding the demon. The reader now knows: that both prayers were heard, the same day they were prayed; that the answer is a person, already dispatched; that the answer is one plan, not two; and even the name of the agent, Raphael, which means God heals. The characters know none of it. Tobit will go on grieving, Sarah will go on waiting, and every reader from here forward watches people despair over prayers that have already been answered.

Draw out the theology before moving on: God's answer wove together two needs that neither pray-er knew were related. Tobit asked to die; he will get his sight. Sarah asked to die; she will get a husband, and the husband will be the son of the other pray-er. Nobody prayed for the thing God actually did, and the thing God actually did answered them both. When the Church says God answers prayer, this is the kind of answering she means: not always the thing we asked, and not on our timetable, but a hearing that is certain and an answer given in God's wisdom; sometimes, as here, it is one we could never have thought to request.

6. From 3:17 to the end of chapter 11, the reader will know the ending while the characters walk in the dark. Why would the author choose to give away his ending here? What is dramatic irony for, in a book about providence? And whose situation, the reader's or the characters', is actually ours?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The author sacrifices suspense to teach doctrine. By handing the reader heaven's ledger in chapter 3, he creates double vision: every scene of grief we now watch is a scene of grief inside an already-answered prayer. That gap between what the characters feel and what is actually true is the book's doctrine of providence, drawn to scale. And our situation is the characters', not the reader's: we live at window level, mid-story, with no chapter 3:16-17 of our own to consult. But the book lets us stand for a while on heaven's side of our kind of story, so that we will remember, back down at window level, what the view from above is like. Faith, this book suggests, is choosing to trust the reader's knowledge while living the character's scene.

Build, Then Press: Is Any of This History?

BUILD, THEN PRESS

The Critical Objection, Given at Full Strength

This objection comes from skeptics and from some Protestant apologists, and it is not frivolous, so give it in full. It runs: Tobit reads like a folktale because it is one. It contains historical difficulties: its opening telescopes Assyrian kings in ways hard to square with the records, and its geography and timeline strain at several seams. It features a demon who flees from fish smoke and an angel in disguise, motifs at home in ancient folklore. Fiction does not become true because it is edifying. If the Church canonized a pious novel and calls it inspired Scripture without error, then either inspiration means very little or the Church erred, and either way the Catholic canon has a soft spot exactly where Protestants said it did.

7. Start by sorting: which of those observations about the text are fair? Then press the assumption doing all the work: what is this objection assuming inspired and without error must mean? Who gets to define what kind of truth a biblical book is asserting?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede the observations: the historical seams are really there, the literary artistry is really there, and pretending Tobit reads like Kings is not piety, it is inattention. Many Catholic scholars read Tobit as an inspired religious novella, a crafted narrative of the exile written to teach Israel how to live faithfully in dispersion. The Church has defined the book's inspiration and canonicity; she has not settled its precise genre or the question of a historical core, and she does not need to.

Now press the hidden premise: the objection assumes that inspired truth must mean modern historiographical accuracy, so that any book not written as chronicle must be false. But truth travels in genres. When Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son, no one demands the family's address, and the parable is true, asserting exactly what it intends to assert about God. The Church states this formally in Dei Verbum 11-12: Scripture teaches solidly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation (a phrase naming the purpose for which God gave us Scripture, not a license to carve Scripture into inspired and uninspired parts), and to find what a book asserts, the interpreter must attend to its literary form, since truth is expressed differently in history, prophecy, poetry, and other forms of discourse. Inerrancy attaches to what the book asserts, and what a narrative like Tobit asserts is its theology: that God's providence governs the exile, that prayer is heard, that fidelity, almsgiving, and marriage are holy, that angels minister and demons lose. On every one of those assertions the book is without error, and the rest of Scripture countersigns each one.

Then turn the point around gently: the objection proves too much, because the Protestant canon also contains parable, poetry, and apocalyptic that no one reads as chronicle; Job's genre is debated by the very traditions that treasure it. Genre has never been the test of canonicity. The Church discerned which books belong to Scripture by apostolic Tradition and her own authoritative judgment (CCC 120), and Session 1 established where Tobit stands in that discernment. Whether Tobit preserves a historical core or is inspired narrative art, what the Holy Spirit teaches through it stands. And notice the pastoral gain rather than loss: if Tobit is crafted teaching, then its portrait of providence is not a report about one lucky family long ago, but a map drawn for every family in every exile, including the ones in this room.

Send · Taking It Out the Door (12 minutes)

S1. Somewhere in your life there is a prayer at window level: prayed honestly, answered by silence so far. If 3:16-17 is telling the truth about how heaven works, what would it change, this week, to live as if that prayer has already been heard?

S2. Sarah was held in her darkest hour by knowing she mattered to her father. Who in your life might be at a window right now, and what would it cost you to make sure they know they matter to you, this week, out loud?

Live It This Week

1. Choose your longest-unanswered prayer and pray it once more this week, but end it differently: thank God that it has been heard, before you see anything. That is not pretending; it is 3:16-17 applied.

2. Send the message, make the call, or write the note to one person who may be at a window. Do not evaluate whether they need it. Tethers of love are built before the dark hour, not during it.

3. Read Tobit 4 before next session: a father who thinks he is dying gives his son everything he knows. Come ready to say which sentence of the advice you would steal for your own life.

Closing Prayer

Father, you heard two prayers as one and sent your answer walking before anyone knew. We hand you tonight our window-level prayers, the ones answered so far by silence. Give us Sarah's honesty, her tether of love, and her turn toward mercy, and let us live this week as people whose prayers have already been heard in the presence of your glory. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory · Tobit 3:16-17 (RSV2CE)

"The prayer of both was heard in the presence of the glory of the great God. And Raphael was sent to heal the two of them."

Leader Reference Card

Every passage in order of use

- Q1** Tobit 3:7-9 · Sarah, Asmodeus, the maids' taunt
- Q2** Tobit 3:10 · the edge, and the tether of love
- Q3** Tobit 3:11-15 with 3:2-6 · the two prayers compared
- Q4** Tobit 3:11 · window, hands, Jerusalem
- Q4 live discovery** 1 Kings 8:44-45 · Daniel 6:10 · praying toward Jerusalem
- Q3 parallel** 1 Samuel 1:10-20 · Hannah prays and the Lord remembers her
- Q5-6** Tobit 3:16-17 · the hinge: heard, and Raphael sent
- Fulfillment** Luke 1:19, 26 · Isaiah 65:24 · Matthew 6:8
- Dig Deeper** Tobit 3:8 · CCC 391, 395 · Asmodeus in sober frame
- Steelman chain** Dei Verbum 11-12 · truth according to literary forms
- Memory** Tobit 3:16-17
- Catechism** CCC 2559 · CCC 2282-2283 · CCC 391, 395 · CCC 302-303