

## 21 Days of Walking with Jesus

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## Day One: Remind yourself of the Gospel Everyday

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Reading: <sup>9</sup> And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup> so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; <sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. <sup>13</sup> He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:9-14. ESV).

One of my most memorable landings was the old Hong Kong airport at night. The city’s static neon lights glowed underneath as we banked right to crest a hill revealing the guiding runway lights. Precision was required from here on in as the runway was shorter than usual due to the ocean, where one would end up if you overshot the landing! Fortunately, I wasn’t flying the Boeing 747 as it was 1977 and I was only fifteen at the time. My dad was the pilot and had he keeled over together with the co-pilot and flight engineer, I had no heroic illusions that I could bring that big steel bird to its knees on the tarmac.

The only reason I was in the cockpit (yea, they still allowed it in those days) in the first place was because of my dad. It reminds me of the Gospel reading for today: “...the Father, who has qualified you...” (verse 12). My dad qualified for me to be in that cockpit, I had squat flying skills. The Greek word for ‘qualified’ is *hikanoo*, and it literally means “sufficient” or “enough”.

A Pastor called Dennis Ellingburg comments further on this passage: “Paul is encouraging the Colossians to thank God because he has made them sufficient, has made them enough, has made them capable of sharing in the inheritance of the saints. So if God makes us sufficient and enough, then it follows that before God qualifies us we are insufficient. We are not enough. We are lacking.

But this passage makes it clear, if you are in Christ it is because God has made you adequate, has made you sufficient, because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. In Christ, and in his blood, you and I find redemption. We are “delivered from the dominion of darkness” and “transferred to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” He qualified you. He sanctified you. He made you who were lacking into one of “saints in light.”

I am a part of the Kingdom of Christ because God loved me and gave me His Son. And I need to preach this truth to myself each and every day. Each day, I need to remind myself that God saved me "not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). I need to hear this each day. I need to speak it to my soul.

The reason this verse so captured my heart today was because this is exactly what my soul needed. I often struggle with feelings of inadequacy, feelings of not measuring up. This verse, though, reminded me that I am inadequate, but that's not a problem because my salvation is not based on my adequacy, but on His, not on my measuring up, but on his qualifying me for salvation. I am saved, not because I am a quality individual but because He sought after me and He chose to work on me just because He is God. And this truth propelled my heart to heights of joy and celebration!

On the days I'm feeling good about myself, I need this truth to humble me and remind me that it's not because of what I did but because of what He did that I belong to Him. I need to be reminded that I am not holy or righteous because of my own righteousness but because Christ imputed his righteousness upon me. It's not me that's righteous, it is Christ who saved me that is righteous. As John Bunyan put it in the Pilgrim's Progress, "Thy righteousness is in Heaven." Here's an excerpt where this is found:

*"One day as I was passing into the field...this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And me thought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before [in front of] him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today and, and forever." Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God."*

Notice that the righteousness is with Christ and not us.

**God doesn't want me because I am qualified, he qualifies me because he loves me and desires me and wants me!"**

([antiochbaptistbrandon.org/pastors-blog/the-father-has-qualified-you](http://antiochbaptistbrandon.org/pastors-blog/the-father-has-qualified-you))

Remind yourself of the Gospel everyday over the next 21 days. Psalm 92 says: “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; *to declare your steadfast love in the morning*, and your faithfulness by night...” (vss. 1-2). Use part of your morning to reflect on the Cross and Resurrection, read accounts of other’s salvation in the Bible and other historical accounts of salvation, they will stir faith in your heart. Then at night before retiring, reflect on your walk with God that day, thanking Him for every good thing (or do it the following morning during your devotional time).

## Day Two: The Praying Life is about Real Relationship and Connected to all of Life

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Reading: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3: 20).

“Our best times together as a family are at dinner. At home after a meal, we push our dishes aside and linger together over coffee or hot chocolate. We have no particular agenda; we simply enjoy one another. Listening, talking, and laughing. If you experience the same thing with good friends or with family, you know it is a little touch of heaven. When Jesus describes the intimacy he wants with us, he talks about joining us for dinner. A praying life feels like our family mealtimes because prayer is all about relationship. It’s intimate and hints at eternity. We don’t think about communication or words but about whom we are talking with. Prayer is simply the medium through which we experience and connect to God. Oddly enough, many people struggle to learn how to pray because they are focusing on praying, not on God. Making prayer the centre is like making conversation the centre of a family mealtime. In prayer, focusing on the conversation is like trying to drive while looking at the windshield instead of through it. It freezes us, making us unsure of where to go. Conversation is only the vehicle through which we experience one another. Consequently, prayer is not the centre of this book. Getting to know a person, God, is the centre.

Because prayer is all about relationship, we can’t work on prayer as an isolated part of life. That would be like going to the gym and working out just your left arm. You’d get a strong left arm, but it would look odd. Many people’s frustrations with prayer come from working on prayer as a discipline in the abstract. We don’t learn to pray in isolation from the rest of our lives. For example, the more I love our youngest daughter, Emily, the more I pray for her. The reverse is true as well; the more I learn how to pray for her, the more I love her. Nor is faith isolated from prayer. The more my faith grows, the bolder my prayers get for Jill. Then, the more my prayers for her are answered, the more my faith grows. Likewise, if I suffer, I learn how to pray. As I learn how to pray, I learn how to endure suffering. This intertwining applies to every aspect of the Christian life. Since a praying life is interconnected with every part of our lives, learning to pray is almost identical to maturing over a lifetime. What does it feel like to grow up? It is a thousand feelings on a thousand different days. That is what learning to pray feels like. So don’t hunt for a feeling in prayer. Deep in our psyches we want an experience with God or an experience in prayer. Once we make that our quest, we lose God. You don’t experience God; you get to know him. You

submit to him. You enjoy him. He is, after all, a person. Consequently, a praying life isn't something you accomplish in a year. It is a journey of a lifetime. The same is true of learning how to love your spouse or a good friend. You never stop learning this side of heaven. There is far too much depth in people to be able to capture love easily. Likewise, there is far too much depth in God to capture prayer easily. Things such as growing up and learning to love do have an overall feel, though. They are slow, steady, filled with ups and downs. Not spectacular but nevertheless real. There is not one magic bullet but a thousand pinpricks that draw us into a spiritual journey or pilgrimage. And every spiritual pilgrimage is a story."

(Miller, Paul. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*. NavPress: Kindle Edition).

## Day Three: The Praying Life becomes Aware of the Story and gives Birth to Hope

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Reading: “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy...

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Romans 15:4-9, 13. ESV).

“If God is sovereign, then he is in control of all the details of my life. If he is loving, then he is going to be shaping the details of my life for my good. If he is all-wise, then he’s not going to do everything I want because I don’t know what I need. If he is patient, then he is going to take time to do all this. When we put all these things together - God’s sovereignty, love, wisdom, and patience — we have a divine story. People often talk about prayer as if it is disconnected from what God is doing in their lives. But we are actors in his drama, listening for our lines, quieting our hearts so we can hear the voice of the Playwright. You can’t have a good story without tension and conflict, without things going wrong. Unanswered prayers create some of the tensions in the story God is weaving in our lives. When we realize this, we want to know what God is doing. What pattern is God weaving?

If God is composing a story with our lives, then our lives are no longer static. We aren’t paralyzed by life; we can hope. Many Christians give in to a quiet cynicism that leaves us unknowingly paralyzed. We see the world as monolithic, frozen. To ask God for change confronts us with our doubt about whether prayer makes any difference. Is change even possible? Doesn’t God control everything? If so, what’s the point? Because it is uncomfortable to feel our unbelief, to come face-to-face with our cynicism, we dull our souls with the narcotic of activity. Many Christians haven’t stopped believing in God; we have just become functional deists, living with God at a distance. We view the world as a box with clearly defined edges. But as we learn to pray well, we’ll discover that this is my Father’s world. Because my Father controls everything, I can ask, and he will listen and act. Since I am his child, change is possible — and hope is born.”

Miller, Paul. A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World.  
NavPress: Kindle Edition.

## Day Four: The Praying Life is Integrated & Reveals the Heart

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Reading: "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

"Many assume that the spiritual person is unruffled by life, unfazed by pressure. This idea that the spiritual person floats above life comes from the ancient world and, in particular, the Greek mind - although we see it strongly in the Eastern mind as well. But even a cursory glance at Jesus' life reveals a busy life. All the Gospel writers notice Jesus' busyness, although Mark in particular highlights it. At one point Jesus' family tries to stage an intervention because he is so busy. "Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3: 20-21). Given the sacredness in the ancient world of eating together, Jesus' life seems out of balance. But he loves people and has the power to help, so he has one interruption after another. If Jesus was among us today, his cell phone would be ringing constantly. The quest for a contemplative life can actually be self-absorbed, focused on my quiet and me. If we love people and have the power to help, then we are going to be busy.

Learning to pray doesn't offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart. In the midst of outer busyness we can develop an inner quiet. Because we are less hectic on the inside, we have a greater capacity to love... and thus to be busy, which in turn drives us even more into a life of prayer. By spending time with our Father in prayer, we integrate our lives with his, with what he is doing in us. Our lives become more coherent. They feel calmer, more ordered, even in the midst of confusion and pressure.

Finally, as you get to know your heavenly Father, you'll get to know your own heart as well. As you develop your relationship with him, it will change you. Or more specifically, he will change you. Real change is at the heart level. We keep forgetting God is a person. We don't learn to love someone without it changing us.

That is just the nature of love that reflects the heart of God. Because God's love is unchanging, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus of Nazareth, now has a scarred body. The Trinity is different because of love. As you develop your relationship with your heavenly Father, you'll change. You'll discover nests of cynicism, pride, and self-will in your heart. You will be unmasked. None of us likes being exposed. We have an allergic reaction to dependency, but this is the state of the heart most necessary for a praying life. A needy heart is a praying heart. Dependency is the heartbeat of prayer. So when it

starts getting uncomfortable, don't pull back from God. He is just starting to work. Be patient."

Miller, Paul. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*. NavPress: Kindle Edition.

### ***Twenty-One Journaling Possibilities***

1. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being intimate), how close do you feel to God today? Write for a while to figure out why you are, say, a 7 rather than a 10.
2. What is God speaking to you about these days? Write to discern his voice.
3. What are you afraid of?
4. The Gospel writers record Jesus asking over one hundred questions. Find some of those questions and pretend that he is asking them of you. How would you respond?
5. Draw a picture of your spiritual journey. Write about it for twenty minutes.
6. Try paraphrasing a familiar passage of Scripture.
7. Write a prayer for someone in your family.
8. Write your testimony in a thousand words or less.
9. What personal risks or fears or people stand in your way of truly being able to follow hard after God?
10. Copy the Lord's prayer into your journal. As you write, expand on it.
11. Brainstorm a list of the characteristics of a soldier, athlete or farmer. What does it mean to be like this in your life?
12. What one thing is frustrating you the most? Why might you want it to be that way? What's in this problem for you?
13. Are you feeling squeezed into someone's mould? Write.
14. Write down some ideas from the Scripture passage you have been studying. Write down the things that have been happening to you at work and home and church. Write down what you've been thinking about. Reflect on

what the Lord might be saying to you through his Word, your circumstances and his still small voice. Can you boil this down to one sentence? One word?

15. What can you learn about *hearing* from the parable of the sower in Luke 8:1-15? How does the rest of chapter 8 relate to the parable?

16. Give yourself permission to be confused. Ask Jesus a hard question. How do you think he would answer it?

17. Write out a passage of Scripture. Note your fleeting thoughts and reactions as you copy it.

18. Dialogue journal through a passage. (John 1:29-34; John 1:35-42; Luke 7:36-50; Luke 19:1-10 are great passages to begin with).

19. Read through Isaiah over some time and find fifty questions God asks.

20. What is “the gospel”?

21. Write a conversational dialogue between yourself and an unsaved friend or family member. How might you open a conversation into spiritual things? How would you anticipate that he/she would respond?

Taken from *Journal Keeping: Writing for Spiritual Growth: ‘Fifty Journaling Possibilities.’* Luan Budd.

### ***Heart Motivations for Spiritual Disciplines***

“It’s important to note that religious practices such as fasting are less important than doing God’s will. As Micah 6: 8 points out, what the Lord truly requires of us is devotion to Himself: “To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” Fasting is not an end in itself; it is a means by which we can worship the Lord and submit ourselves in humility to Him. We don’t make God love us any more than He already does if we fast, or if we fast longer. As Galatians states, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (5: 1). The goal of any discipline is freedom. If the result is not greater freedom, something is wrong. Even if we wanted to, we could not manipulate God. We fast and pray for results, but the results are in God’s hands. One of the greatest spiritual benefits of fasting is becoming more attentive to God—becoming more aware of our own inadequacies and His adequacy, our own contingencies and His self-sufficiency— and listening to what He wants us to be and do. Christian fasting, therefore, is totally antithetical to, say, Hindu fasting. Both seek results; however, Hindu fasting focuses on the self and

tries to get something for a perceived sacrifice. Christian fasting focuses on God. The results are spiritual results that glorify God— both in the person who fasts and in others for whom we fast and pray.”

(Towns, Elmer L. *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough: A Practical Guide to Nine Biblical Fasts* (Kindle Locations 221-231). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition).

“The goal of writing reflectively in a journal, and of reading and studying Scripture, is to gain a fuller understanding of our Saviour and his incomprehensible love for us. We desire to have our faith increased. This will change the way we live *from the inside out*. It is important to remember that the ideas presented here are not disciplines that somehow make us godly—at least not in the sense that if we write every day we’ll earn the title. We can’t think like the Pharisees, who believed that fasting twice a week made them godly men. Journaling, even journaling seven days a week, isn’t the key. We seek a heart that truly believes, that is passionate for the Lord, a heart that is in love with Jesus.

For me, journaling is all about unlocking the secrets of my heart. Since the Lord loves me unconditionally, it’s OK for me to take the risk of being honest about my sin and lack of faith. I am free to look at my heart’s true motivation and admit where it stinks. This is very private, obviously, but essential to an authentic walk with God. In our journey toward maturity, a disciplined life of fasting, tithing, Bible study, service, prayer, silence, reflection, witnessing, solitude and journaling can be very helpful *or* it can be all wrong. Our heart’s motivation makes all the difference.

Hopefully, journal keeping will not become a prescriptive, legalistic discipline that you feel obligated to add to your devotional time. It is not prescriptive for me, so I’d hate for it to become an obligation for you. My desire is actually just the opposite. These ideas are intended to help. Strategies, if you will, to aid us in our search for God. They are tools we can use as we feel we have the need—tools that allow us to take the risk and see who we really are, tools that help to strengthen our faith, tools that fan the flame of our devotion as we passionately pursue him. Luci Shaw rightly reminds us, “Risk demands faith and faith has eternal reward.”

Journal Keeping: Writing for Spiritual Growth. Luann Budd.

## Day 5: Come as you are, Come Messy

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Jesus wants us to be without pretence when we come to him in prayer. Instead, we often try to be something we aren't. We begin by concentrating on God, but almost immediately our minds wander off in a dozen different directions. The problems of the day push out our well-intentioned resolve to be spiritual. We give ourselves a spiritual kick in the pants and try again, but life crowds out prayer. What's the problem? We're trying to be spiritual, to get it right. We know we don't need to clean up our act in order to become a Christian, but when it comes to praying, we forget that. We, like adults, try to fix ourselves up. In contrast, Jesus wants us to come to him like little children, just as we are.

The difficulty of coming just as we are is that we are messy. And prayer makes it worse. When we slow down to pray, we are immediately confronted with how unspiritual we are, with how difficult it is to concentrate on God. We don't know how bad we are until we try to be good. Nothing exposes our selfishness and spiritual powerlessness like prayer. In contrast, little children never get frozen by their selfishness. Like the disciples, they come just as they are, totally self-absorbed. They seldom get it right. As parents or friends, we know all that. In fact, we are delighted (most of the time!) to find out what is on their little hearts. We don't scold them for being self-absorbed or fearful. That is just who they are.

God also cheers when we come to him with our wobbling, unsteady prayers. Jesus does not say, "Come to me, all you who have learned how to concentrate in prayer, whose minds no longer wander, and I will give you rest." No, Jesus opens his arms to his needy children and says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11: 28, NASB). The criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wandering mind. Come messy. What does it feel like to be weary? You have trouble concentrating. The problems of the day are like claws in your brain. You feel pummelled by life. What does heavy-laden feel like? Same thing. You have so many problems you don't even know where to start. You can't do life on your own anymore. Jesus wants you to come to him that way! Your weariness drives you to him. Don't try to get the prayer right; just tell God where you are and what's on your mind. That's what little children do. They come as they are, runny noses and all. Like the disciples, they just say what is on their minds. We know that to become a Christian we shouldn't try to fix ourselves up, but when it comes to praying we completely forget that. We'll sing the old gospel hymn, "Just as I Am," but when it comes to praying, we don't come just as we are. We try, like adults, to fix ourselves up. Private, personal prayer is one of the last great bastions of

legalism. In order to pray like a child, you might need to unlearn the non-personal, non-real praying that you've been taught.

Miller, Paul E. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*. NavPress. Kindle Edition.

## Day 6: Being the *Real You* with God

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Why is it so important to come to God just as you are? If you don't, then you are artificial and unreal, like the Pharisees. Rarely did they tell Jesus directly what they were thinking. Jesus accused them of being hypocrites, of being masked actors with two faces. They weren't real. Nor did they like little children. The Pharisees were indignant when the little children poured into the temple (after Jesus had cleansed it) and began worshipping him. Jesus replied, quoting Psalm 8, "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise" (Mat. 21:16). The only way to come to God is by taking off any spiritual mask. The real you has to meet the real God. He is a person. So, instead of being frozen by your self-preoccupation, talk with God about your worries. Tell him where you are weary. If you don't begin with where you are, then where you are will sneak in the back door. Your mind will wander to where you are weary. We are often so busy and overwhelmed that when we slow down to pray, we don't know where our hearts are. We don't know what troubles us. So, oddly enough, we might have to worry before we pray. Then our prayers will make sense. They will be about our real lives. Your heart could be, and often is, askew. That's okay. You have to begin with what is real.

Jesus didn't come for the righteous. He came for sinners. All of us qualify. The very things we try to get rid of — our weariness, our distractedness, our messiness — are what get us in the front door! That's how the gospel works. That's how prayer works. In bringing your real self to Jesus, you give him the opportunity to work on the real you, and you will slowly change. The kingdom will come. You'll end up less selfish. The kingdom comes when Jesus becomes king of your life. But it has to be your life. You can't create a kingdom that doesn't exist, where you try to be better than you really are. Jesus calls that hypocrisy — putting on a mask to cover the real you. Ironically, many attempts to teach people to pray encourage the creation of a split personality. You're taught to "do it right." Instead of the real, messy you meeting God, you try to re-create yourself by becoming spiritual. No wonder prayer is so unsatisfying. So instead of being paralyzed by who you are, begin with who you are. That's how the gospel works. God begins with you. It's a little scary because you are messed up. Become like the little children Jesus surrounded himself with.

When Nathanael first hears about Jesus, he says the first thing that comes to his mind: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1: 46). It is the pure, uncensored Nathanael. When Jesus greets Nathanael, you can almost see Jesus smiling when he says, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" (1: 47). Jesus ignores the fact that Nathanael has judged Jesus'

entire family and friends in Nazareth. He simply enjoys that Nathanael is real, without guile, a man who doesn't pretend. Jesus seems to miss the sin and see a person. It is classic Jesus. He loves real people. God would much rather deal with the real thing. Jesus said that he came for sinners, for messed-up people who keep messing up (see Luke 15: 1-2). Come dirty. The point of the gospel is that we are incapable of beginning with God and his kingdom. Many Christians pray mechanically for God's kingdom (for missionaries, the church, and so on), but all the while their lives are wrapped up in their own kingdoms. You can't add God's kingdom as an overlay to your own.

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## Day 7: Learning to Talk with your Father

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The opening words of the Lord's Prayer are *Our Father*. You are the centre of your heavenly Father's affection. That is where you find rest for your soul. If you remove prayer from the welcoming heart of God (as much teaching on the Lord's Prayer does), prayer becomes a legalistic chore. We do the duty but miss touching the heart of God. By coming to God "weary and heavy-laden," we discover his heart; heaven touches earth and his will is done. We have much more to learn about praying, but by coming like a little child to our Father, we have learned the heart of prayer. I say "we" deliberately because I regularly forget the simplicity of prayer. I become depressed, and after failing to fix my depression, I give up on myself and remain distant from God. I forget the openness of my Father's heart. He wants me to come depressed, just as I am. In fact, you might want to take a wobbly step now by pausing to pray like a little child.

How do we learn to talk with our Father? By asking like a child, believing like a child, and even playing like a child. How do little children ask? Without guile. They just say what is on their minds. They have no awareness of what is appropriate or inappropriate. Jesus tells us to watch little children if we want to learn how to ask in prayer. After introducing the idea of bold asking in the Sermon on the Mount ("Ask, and it will be given to you") he tells us why we can boldly ask. "Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7: 7, 9-11).

If we earthly parents, with all our brokenness, still give our kids good gifts, won't our heavenly Father do even more? Our kids' requests, no matter how trivial, tug at our hearts. God feels the same.

The second thing we must do in learning to pray is to believe like a child. Children are supremely confident of their parents' love and power. Instinctively, they trust. They believe their parents want to do them good. If you know your parent loves and protects you, it fills your world with possibility. You just chatter away with what is on your heart. It works the same in the world of prayer. If you learn to pray, you learn to dream again. I say "again" because every child naturally dreams and hopes. To learn how to pray is to enter the world of a child, where all things are possible. Little children can't imagine that their parents won't eventually say yes. They know if they keep pestering their parents, they'll eventually give in. Childlike faith drives this persistence. But as we get older, we get less naive and more cynical.

Disappointment and broken promises are the norm instead of hoping and dreaming. Our childlike faith dies a thousand little deaths. Jesus encourages us to believe like little children by telling stories about adults who acted like children: the parable of the persistent widow, who won't take no for an answer from an unjust judge (see Luke 18: 1-8), and the parable about a man who badgers his neighbour to lend him three loaves for a friend who has come at midnight (see Luke 11: 5-8). On the rare occasion when Jesus encounters an adult who believes like a child, he stands on a soapbox and practically yells, "Pay attention to this person. Look how he or she believes!" He only does that twice; both times the person was a Gentile, from outside the community of faith. The first is a Roman officer, a centurion, who is so confident of Jesus' ability to heal his paralyzed servant that he asks Jesus to heal without even visiting his home. He tells Jesus, "But say the word, and let my servant be healed" (Luke 7:7).

Jesus is stunned. He turns to the crowd following him and says, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (7: 9). The second is a Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon. Even though Jesus rebuffs her, she keeps coming back. Jesus marvels at her faith, giving her his second Great Faith Oscar: "Woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (Matthew 15: 28). In the last chapter we saw that believing the gospel — knowing God's acceptance for us in Jesus — helps us to come to him messy. Now we see that the gospel also frees us to ask for what is on our hearts. Miller, Paul E. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*. NavPress. Kindle Edition.

## **Day 8: Learning to Talk with your Father (continued)**

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Learning to Play Again: Besides asking and believing like a child, learning to pray involves, surprisingly, learning to play again. How do little children play? If you ask a parent how long a one-year-old stays on task, he or she just smiles. But if you must know, it varies anywhere from three seconds to three minutes. It isn't long, nor is it particularly organized. How can that teach us to pray? Think for a minute. How do we structure our adult conversations? We don't. Especially when talking with old friends, the conversation bounces from subject to subject. It has a fun, meandering, play-like quality. Why would our prayer time be any different? After all, God is a person.

Even the Apostle Paul's prayer in Ephesians has a play-like quality. He starts praying by saying, "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom" (Ephesians 1: 16-17). He continues to pray for several verses, but you can't be sure where he stops. He starts praying again at the beginning of chapter 3, "For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles..." but as soon as he mentions Gentiles, he seemingly gets distracted and stops praying. Finally, he picks up his prayer again in 3: 14, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father." Paul's praying is all over the map. It is classic ADD praying. He starts praying, interrupts himself, starts praying again, gets distracted, and then finally finishes his prayer. Prayer that lacks this play-like quality is almost autistic. When you are autistic, you have trouble picking up social clues from the other person. When your mind starts wandering in prayer, be like a little child. Don't worry about being organized or staying on task. Paul certainly wasn't! Remember you are in conversation with a person. Instead of beating yourself up, learn to play again. Pray about what your mind is wandering to. Maybe it is something that is important to you. Maybe the Spirit is nudging you to think about something else.

When it comes to prayer, we, too, just need to get the words out. Feel free to stop and pray now. It's okay if your mind wanders or your prayers get interrupted. Don't be embarrassed by how needy your heart is and how much it needs to cry out for grace. Just start praying. Remember, the point of Christianity isn't to learn a lot of truths so you don't need God anymore. We don't learn God in the abstract. We are drawn into his life. Become like a little child — ask, believe, and, yes, even play. When you stop trying to be an adult and get it right, prayer will just flow because God has done something remarkable. He's given you a new voice. It is his own. God has replaced your badly damaged prayer antenna with a new one — the Spirit. He is in you praying. Paul told us that the Spirit puts the praying heart of Jesus in you. "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"

(Galatians 4: 6). You'll discover your heart meshing with God's. You'll discover that prayer is a feast. As you get the clutter off your heart and mind, it is easy to be still in God's presence. You'll be able to say with David, "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother" (Psalm 131: 2).

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## Day 9: Spending Time with your Father

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“You’d think if Jesus was the Son of God, he wouldn’t need to pray. Or at least he wouldn’t need a specific prayer time because he’d be in such a constant state of prayer. You’d expect him to have a direct line to his heavenly Father, like broadband to heaven. At the least, you’d think Jesus could do a better job of tuning out the noise of the world. But surprisingly, Jesus seemed to need time with God just as much as we do.”

Jesus has an intense first day and night of public ministry (Mark 1:21-39). “The next morning before sunrise, Jesus wakes up, makes his way out of town to a desolate place, and prays. He is gone long enough that the crowds gather again, prompting the disciples to go searching. When Peter finds him, he tells Jesus, “Everyone is looking for you” (Mark 1: 37). It is a remarkable day — the evening and morning of the first day of a new creation. The new Adam rolls back the curse and cuts through evil. Demons and sickness flee the presence of Life. Aslan is on the move.

### Why Jesus Needed to Pray

Why does Jesus pray in the morning, in a desolate place where he can’t be interrupted? His life offers three clues:

**Clue #1: His Identity.** Whenever Jesus starts talking about his relationship with his heavenly Father, Jesus becomes childlike, very dependent. “The Son can do nothing of his own accord” (John 5: 19). “I can do nothing on my own” (John 5: 30). “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me” (John 8: 28). “The Father who sent me has himself given me [...] what to say and what to speak” (John 12: 49). Only a child will say, “I only do what I see my Father is doing.” When Jesus tells us to become like little children, he isn’t telling us to do anything he isn’t already doing. Jesus is, without question, the most dependent human being who ever lived. Because he can’t do life on his own, he prays. And he prays. And he prays. Luke tells us that Jesus “would withdraw to desolate places and pray” (Luke 5: 16). When Jesus tells us that “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15: 5), he is inviting us into his life of a living dependence on his heavenly Father. When Jesus tells us to believe, he isn’t asking us to work up some spiritual energy. He is telling us to realize that, like him, we don’t have the resources to do life. When you know that you (like Jesus) can’t do life on your own, then prayer makes complete sense. But it goes even deeper than that. Jesus defines himself only in relationship with his heavenly Father. Adam and Eve began their quest for self-identity after the Fall. Only after they acted independently of God did they have a sense of a separate self. Because Jesus has no separate sense of self, he has no identity crisis, no angst. Consequently, he doesn’t try to “find himself.” He knows himself only in relationship with his Father. He can’t conceive of himself outside of that relationship. Imagine

asking Jesus how he's doing. He'd say, "My Father and I are doing great. He has given me everything I need today." You respond, "I'm glad your Father is doing well, but let's just focus on you for a minute. Jesus, how are you doing?" Jesus would look at you strangely, as if you were speaking a foreign language. The question doesn't make sense. He simply can't answer the question "How are you doing?" without including his heavenly Father. That's why contemplating the terror of the cross at Gethsemane was such an agony for Jesus. He had never experienced a moment when he wasn't in communion with his Father. Jesus' anguish is our normal. His prayer life is an expression of his relationship with his Father. He wants to be alone with the person he loves."

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## **Day 10: Spending Time with your Father (continued)**

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**Clue #2: His One-Person Focus.** When Jesus interacts with people, he narrows his focus down to one person. When he encounters a lame man by the pool of Bethesda, he first sees a multitude; then he sees just him. In the midst of “a multitude of invalids — blind, lame, and paralyzed... Jesus saw him lying there” (John 5: 3, 6). When Jesus is with someone, that person is the only person in the room. Jesus slows down and concentrates on one person at a time. The way he loves people is identical to the way he prays to his Father. This one-person focus is how love works. Love incarnates by slowing down and focusing on just the beloved. We don’t love in general; we love one person at a time. I think of that almost every morning as I kneel in front of Kim and lace up her muddy work boots. It is a daily foot-washing service for my soul.

**Clue #3: His Limited Humanity.** The implication of Jesus’ one-person focus is that the fully human Jesus doesn’t multitask well. He needs to be away from people in order to tune in to his heavenly Father. Theoretically, Jesus could have concentrated on his Father while he healed people. He could have used his deity to protect himself from the slowness and inefficiency of life. When the bleeding woman interrupts him on the way to Jairus’s house, Jesus could have healed her without stopping to connect with her as a person (see Luke 8: 40-48). But he doesn’t. When he rejects Satan’s temptation to turn the stone into bread, he rejects efficiency and chooses love (see Matthew 4: 1-4). So, as a fully human being, he needs to get away to pray. When Jesus withdraws from the crowded house in Capernaum to a desolate place in the wilderness, he is following his own advice from the Sermon on the Mount to “go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father” (Matthew 6: 6, NIV). From all eternity, he has been in relationship with his Father. He needs to concentrate on his Father. He wants to be with him, so he gets alone to pray.

**No Substitute for Spending Time.** Jesus’ example teaches us that prayer is about relationship. When he prays, he is not performing a duty; he is getting close to his Father. Any relationship, if it is going to grow, needs private space, time together without an agenda, where you can get to know each other. This creates an environment where closeness can happen, where we can begin to understand each other’s hearts. You don’t create intimacy; you make room for it. This is true whether you are talking about your spouse, your friend, or God. You need space to be together. Efficiency, multitasking, and busyness all kill intimacy. In short, you can’t get to know God on the fly. If Jesus has to pull away from people and noise in order to pray, then it makes sense that we need to as well.

Praying like Jesus Prayed Jesus' pattern of a morning prayer follows the ancient rhythm of the Hebrew writers who bent their hearts to God in the morning. Here's a sampling of psalms that describes this practice: *O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch* (Psa. 5: 3). *I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning* (Psa. 59: 16). *But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you* (Psa. 88: 13). *Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul* (Psa. 143: 8). Do we have to pray in the morning? No, Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17 and his prayer later at Gethsemane were both evening prayers.

[See addition: Practical Ways to Connect Regularly with God]

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## Day 11: Learning to be Helpless

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“Little children are good at helplessness. It’s what they do best. But as adults, we soon forget how important helplessness is. I, for one, am allergic to helplessness. I don’t like it. I want a plan, an idea, or maybe a friend to listen to my problem. This is how I instinctively approach everything because I am confident in my own abilities. This is even true in my work of teaching people about prayer. Even though I lead prayer seminars and wrote a study on prayer, up until a year ago, it never occurred to me to pray systematically and regularly for our prayer ministry. Why not? Because I was not helpless. I could manage our prayer ministry on my own. I never said this or even thought it, but I lived it. Ironically, helplessness is one of the central themes in our prayer seminar. I wasn’t helpless about the ministry of teaching helplessness! Such is the human heart. I only started praying regularly about our seminar ministry when it wasn’t moving forward — when I became helpless. Prayer = Helplessness God wants us to come to him empty-handed, weary, and heavy-laden. Instinctively we want to get rid of our helplessness before we come to God. One participant of our prayer seminars put it this way: I am starting to see there is a difference between “saying prayers” and honest praying. Both can sound the same on the outside, but the former is too often motivated by a sense of obligation and guilt; whereas the latter is motivated by a conviction that I am completely helpless to “do life” on my own. Or in the case of praying for others, that I am completely helpless to help others without the grace and power of God.

The Norwegian Lutheran Ole Hallesby articulated the importance of helplessness in his classic book *Prayer*. He described how Mary’s request to Jesus at the wedding of Cana —“They have no wine” (John 2: 3) — is a perfect description of prayer. Prayer is bringing your helplessness to Jesus. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, summarized it beautifully: “Prayer is an expression of who we are. . . . We are a living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfilment.” Throughout the book of John we see people coming to Jesus because of their helplessness. The Samaritan woman has no water (see John 4). Later in that same chapter, the official’s son has no health. The crippled man by the pool of Bethesda has no help to get into the water (see John 5). The crowd has no bread (see John 6). The blind man has no sight (see John 9). And finally, Lazarus has no life (see John 11). We received Jesus because we were weak, and that’s how we follow him. Paul told the Colossians, “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Colossians 2: 6). We forget that helplessness is how the Christian life works. Paul was reminded of this when he prayed three times for God to remove his thorn in the flesh. It didn’t happen. Instead, God reminded Paul of how the gospel works. “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the

more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12: 9). The gospel, God’s free gift of grace in Jesus, only works when we realize we don’t have it all together.

The same is true for prayer. The very thing we are allergic to — our helplessness — is what makes prayer work. It works because we are helpless. We can’t do life on our own. Prayer mirrors the gospel. In the gospel, the Father takes us as we are because of Jesus and gives us his gift of salvation. In prayer, the Father receives us as we are because of Jesus and gives us his gift of help. We look at the inadequacy of our praying and give up, thinking something is wrong with us. God looks at the adequacy of his Son and delights in our sloppy, meandering prayers.

A Wrong View of Maturity. We tell ourselves, “Strong Christians pray a lot. If I were a stronger Christian, I’d pray more.” Strong Christians do pray more, but they pray more because they realize how weak they are. They don’t try to hide it from themselves. Weakness is the channel that allows them to access grace. As we mature as Christians, we see more and more of our sinful natures, but at the same time we see more and more of Jesus. As we see our weaknesses more clearly, we begin to grasp our need for more grace.”

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Practical ways to Connect Regularly with God

**Overcoming Objections** No matter when or how we pray, we often find reasons why we can’t slow down enough to have a regular prayer time. One objection to a daily prayer time is “I pray all the time.” While being “constant in prayer” (Romans 12: 12) is an important way of praying that we’ll talk about later, this is no substitute for focused times of prayer. For example, a husband and wife who only talk in snippets to one another throughout the day would have a shallow relationship. You’d be business partners, not lovers. You can’t build a relationship by sound bites. Another objection is busyness. When I first heard Martin Luther’s comment that he couldn’t get by unless he had three or four hours of prayer daily, I scratched my head.[ 3] Knowing how busy Luther was, you’d think he would want to cut out prayer. Now, years later, it makes perfect sense. In fact, the more pressure, the more I need to pray. I pray in the morning because my life is so pressured. If you are not praying, then you are quietly confident that time, money, and talent are all you need in life. You’ll always be a little too tired, a little too busy. But if, like Jesus, you realize you can’t do life on your own, then no matter how busy, no matter how tired you are, you will find the time to pray. Time in prayer makes you even more dependent on God because you don’t have as much time to get things done. Every minute spent in prayer is one less minute where you can be doing

something “productive.” So the act of praying means that you have to rely more on God.

**Take Baby Steps** When it comes to spending time with God, take baby steps. Don’t set impossible goals and then collapse. If you can remember a time in your life when you had a great half hour of prayer, don’t make that your standard. Start slowly. Take a baby step of five minutes. There is no one way to do this. Some people pray on their way to work. My one caution is that it is tough to be intimate when you are multitasking. It would weaken a marriage if talking to your spouse in the car was the only time you communicated. It will do the same to your relationship with God.

Here are seven simple suggestions of how you can spend time with your Father in the morning:

*Get to bed.* What you do in the evening will shape your morning. The Hebrew notion of a day as the evening and morning (see Genesis 1) helps you plan for prayer. If you want to pray in the morning, then plan your evening so you don’t stay up too late. The evening and the morning are connected.

*Get up.* Praying in bed is wonderful. In fact, the more you pray out of bed, the more you’ll pray in bed. But you’ll never develop a morning prayer time in bed. Some of my richest prayer times are at night. I’ll wake up praying. But those prayer times only began to emerge because I got out of bed to pray.

*Get awake.* Maybe you need to make a pot of coffee first or take a shower.

*Get a quiet place.* Maybe a room, a chair, or a place with a view. Or maybe you do better going for a walk. Make sure that no one can interrupt you.

*Get comfortable.* Don’t feel like you have to pray on your knees. For years I was hindered from praying because I found it so uncomfortable to pray on my knees.

*Get going.* Start with just five minutes. Start with a small goal that you can attain rather than something heroic. You’ll quickly find that the time will fly.

*Keep going.* Consistency is more important than length. If you pray five minutes every day, then the length of time will slowly grow. You’ll look up and discover that twenty minutes have gone by. You’ll enjoy being with God. Jesus is so concerned about hanging in there with prayer that he tells “his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18: 1, NIV). Regardless of how or when you pray, if you give God the space, he will touch your soul. God knows you are exhausted, but at the same time he longs to be part of your life. A feast awaits.

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## Day 12: Crying “Abba” continuously and bending your heart to your Father

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If we had a constant sense of our spiritual poverty, spiritual weaknesses, and need for mercy, then short, brief, spontaneous prayers would be more part of our “praying life.” Miller describes thoughts like: “I’m at my worst when I am passionate about a new idea. I can drift into selling instead of listening and can easily become dominating...when someone shares an idea that was originally mine, I want to mention that I first thought of it...the only way to quiet my soul’s desire for prominence is to begin to pray: *Apart from you I can do nothing.* I discovered myself praying simple two-and three-word prayers, such as *Teach me* or *Help me, Jesus.* The Psalms are filled with this type of short bullet prayer. Praying simple one word or verse prayers can take the pressure off because we don’t have to sort out exactly what we need. Just praying *Father, Father* when I am too tired to figure things out, helps me to stay focused on my source of strength. The pattern Jesus set included referencing God by the intimate term “Abba,” which likely is equivalent to the idea of “papa.” Jesus’ first recorded sentence at age twelve is about his father (Lk. 2:49), *Abba* is the first part of the Lord’s Prayer, his first word in the Gethsemane prayer, on the cross and one of his last (Lk.23:34, 46). *Abba* is the first word used by the returning prodigal son.

The Apostle Paul mentions “unceasing prayer” 12 times in Scripture, seldom twice in the same way. “A praying life isn’t simply a morning prayer time; it is about slipping into prayer at odd hours of the day, not because we are disciplined but because we are in touch with our own poverty of spirit, realising that we can’t even walk through a mall (our hearts tend to despise, judge or lust) or our neighbourhood without the help of the Spirit of Jesus”

Anxiety creates openings for prayer. “Instead of fighting anxiety, we can use it as a springboard to bending our hearts to God. Instead of trying to suppress anxiety, manage it, or smother it with pleasure, we can turn our anxiety toward God. When we do that, we’ll discover that we’ve slipped into continuous praying.” Anxiety results from wanting to control our present and future life (like God), even though we don’t have the wisdom, power or knowledge of God. Instead of trying to play God in our life, we should cling to God in the midst of our chaos, praying continuously and humbly. David captured the connection between a humble heart and a quiet heart in Psalm 131:1-2. As you pray words similar to those, your heart will experience quietness. It as though praying itself becomes the answer to your prayer. Be humble, helpless and dependent. Instead of hunting for the perfect spiritual state to lift you above the chaos, pray *in* the chaos...we see the pattern in Paul’s advice to the Philippians about anxiety [Phil. 4:6-7]...Moments when you are prone to

anxiety can become invitations to drift into prayer. When you stop trying to control your life and instead allow your anxieties and problems to bring you to God in prayer, you shift from worrying to watching. You watch God weave his patterns in the story of your life.

## Day 13: Learning to Trust again, Cures for Cynicism

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The opposite of childlike faith is cynicism. This attitude is pervasive in our age and culture. In our prayer life it manifests when prayers ARE answered (and we say, “It would have happened anyway”). But we can be cynical when our prayers are NOT answered too (“I knew prayer wouldn’t work”). Cynics convince themselves that they see “what is really going on,” and that their interpretation of things is realistic, authentic and accurate. Sadly, it creates weariness with life that kills intimacy with God. A praying life is full of hope and of a vital relationship with God. It is the opposite of cynicism because it chooses to engage evil. It doesn’t take no for an answer. The Psalmist was in God’s face, hoping, dreaming, and asking. Prayer is feisty. Cynicism, on the other hand, merely critiques. It is passive, cocooning itself from the passions of the great cosmic battle we are engaged in. It is without hope.

Cynicism begins when we have either *naïve optimism* or *foolish confidence* about life and prayer. Naïve optimism believes we don’t need to pray, because it will all work out. Foolish confidence believes God always intends to give us a pain-free, problem-free life, we look for pleasant results and not deeper realities. Our optimism and confidence, however, must be centred in the promises and character of God to avoid being naïve or foolish. This helps avoid the dangers of not being able to see the dark side of life honestly. Genuine faith comes from knowing my heavenly Father loves, enjoys, and cares for me.

Our personal struggles with cynicism and defeated weariness are reinforced by our culture’s demand for perfectionism. Believing you have to have the perfect relationship, the perfect children, or a perfect body sets you up for a critical spirit, the breeding ground for cynicism. In the absence of perfection, we resort to spin-trying to make ourselves look good, unwittingly dividing ourselves into a public and private self. We cease to be real and become the subject of cynicism.

Jesus offers SIX Cures for cynicism: **“Be warm but wary.”** Be wary and realistic about evil in the world, but warm and confident toward the goodness and sovereignty of God in your life. “The feel of a praying life is cautious optimism-caution because of the Fall, optimism because of redemption...I am called to trust that God sees what I see. In fact, he sees beyond what I see, He sees the whole story and is completely trustworthy to be at work on a grand scale, in the minutiae, and even in my own life.”

**“Learn to hope again.”** The cynic believes we are swept along by forces greater than we are. Those who believe in God believe that he will act, and

will always act in a way that is good for those he loves, so that, we will have joy and peace. When you pray, you are touching the hopeful heart of God. **“Cultivate a childlike spirit.”** Instead of critiquing others’ stories, watch the story our Father is weaving. Alan Jacobs, in his biography of C.S. Lewis, noted that “those who will never be fooled can never be delighted, because without self-forgetfulness there can be no delight.” The cynic focuses on the darkness, the child focuses on the Shepherd and interprets life through the lens of Psalm 23.

**“Cultivate a Thankful Spirit.”** During an intensely difficult period, I thanked God for his touches of grace from the previous day. Either I thanked God or gave into bitterness, the stepchild of cynicism. There was no middle ground. Realising your whole life is a gift from God and cultivating a spirit of thankfulness undercuts cynicism. Thankfulness necessarily draws you into the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, into their enjoyment of one another, of life, and of people. Thanksgiving looks reality in the face and rejoices at God’s care. It replaces a bitter spirit with a generous one.

**“Cultivating Repentance.”** Cynics imagine they are disinterested observers on a quest for authenticity. They assume they are humble because they offer nothing. In fact, they feel deeply superior because they see through everything. C.S. Lewis pointed out that if you see through everything, you eventually see nothing. He said that what was required was a restoration of the innocent eye, the eye that can see with wonder. That is the eye of a child. The cynic must repent of the pride that constantly explains everything, or believes their false insight into life, prayer, and the heart of others.

## Day 14: Cures for Cynicism

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***“Developing an Eye of Jesus,”*** is the sixth cure for cynicism. Cynicism looks in the wrong direction. It looks for cracks in Christianity instead of looking for the presence of Jesus. Jesus never used his power to show off, he used it for love. So he wasn’t immediately noticeable. Humility makes you disappear, which is why we avoid it.

In order to see Jesus, I would have to look lower. I would have to look at people simply, as a child does. I began to ask myself, “Where did I see Jesus today?” I hunted for the difference between what others would normally be like and what they had become through the presence of Jesus. The presence of Jesus, the only truly authentic person who ever lived, would reveal itself in the restoration of authenticity in people. I’d see Christians whose inner and outer lives matched [Miller then goes on to describe how this looked throughout his day]. Instead of focusing on other people’s lack of integrity, on their split personalities, we need to focus on how Jesus is reshaping the church to be more like himself. We need to view the body of Christ with grace.

At the heart of Paul’s praying is his delight in how Jesus is influencing people’s lives. He doesn’t have a generalised spirit of thanksgiving, he is thankful for “you.” Even with the messed-up Corinthian church, Paul is thankful: “I give thanks to my God always for you” (1 Cor. 1:4). Then he addresses their permitting of incest, suing one another in court, and getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper! Because he keeps his eye on the present work of Jesus, Paul is not overcome with evil but overcomes evil with good.

Goodness infests Paul’s prayer life. He is living out the gospel. Even as God has extended grace to Paul, so Paul extends grace to the Corinthians. He looks at the church through rose-coloured glasses, tinted by the blood of his Saviour. Christians aren’t better or superior to unbelievers, but our Saviour is. He makes the difference. He is alive and well in his church.

## Day 15: Learning to ask Your Father

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Secularism and the Enlightenment worldview divide the world into 'truth for all' (verifiable facts) and 'true only for you' (the world of feelings and "socially constructed values"). C.S. Lewis was referring to the Enlightenment view when he said, "Nearly all that I loved (things like goodness, beauty and truth) I believed to be imaginary, nearly all I believed to be real (things like reason and rationalism) I thought grim and meaningless." When his good friend, J.R.R. Tolkien told him that Christianity was a "true myth,"\* it merged Lewis' two great quests for beauty and truth.

The Enlightenment mind-set marginalises prayer because it doesn't allow God to connect with this world. You are allowed a personal, localised deity as long as you keep him out of your science notes and don't take him seriously.

Secularism is a cynical view of reality. *Love*, this thing that everyone is pursuing, is a non-category amongst social scientists. Something is seriously wrong with a view of the world that can't explain the most basic components of life.

"We could see Him beyond all His creation only if we become "babes and sucklings." Just as the children, not the chief priests and the scribes, when they saw him in human form in the temple cried, "Hosanna to the Son of David," so we, if we are born again and become like them, children ourselves-intuitive, pure, simple, direct, receptive, open-could pass from His creation to Himself...I mean the heart is absolutely sure that beyond all this show is One who created and continues to uphold it. The "strength" that the babes and sucklings of faith show, by their simple and direct and unhesitating affirmation, puts to shame all the strength of the clever and the strong" (Charles Malick).

Because it is my Father's world, whatever I find myself doing, we can ask and pray for His help. It is a complete unity of thinking and feeling, physical and spiritual, public and personal.

God is both infinite and personal. Western culture embraces an infinite God, as long as he doesn't become personal. Many other cultures embrace a personal God, but fail to understand his infinite nature. The Bible presents God as both. "We just don't think God could be concerned with the puny details of our lives. We either believe he's too big or that we're not that important. A praying life opens itself to an infinite, searching God. As we shall see, we can't do that without releasing control, without constantly surrendering our will to God. 'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (mat. 6:10) is actually scary.

“All of Jesus’ teaching on prayer in the gospels can be summarised with one word: *ask*.” One of the reasons Jesus makes extravagant promises in prayer is God’s desire to be part of our honest expressions of desires, feelings and passions. It is God’s way of helping us lose all confidence in ourselves, and put all confidence in Him.

To teach us how to pray, Jesus told us stories about weak people who knew they couldn’t do life on their own. The persistent widow and the friend at midnight get access, not because they are strong but because they are desperate. Learned desperation is at the heart of a praying life.

Our dislike of asking is rooted in our desire for independence. What do I lose when I have a praying life? Control. Independence. What do I gain? Friendship with God. A quiet heart. The living work of God in the hearts of those I love...essentially I lose my kingdom and get His.

\*”When Lewis uses the word *myth*, he does not mean a story that is not historically true. Rather, he means a story that is rooted in ultimate reality—a story that explains the nature of things...” (*The Romantic Rationalist*, pg. 52).

## Day 16: Asking for Our daily Bread

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The praying life is the abiding life. It is the way life should be done, in partnership with God. One of the best ways to learn how to abide is to ask anything. Don't just ask for spiritual things or for 'good things.' Jesus prayer for 'daily bread' was an invitation to bring all our needs to Him. Often our need for daily bread opens doors to deeper heart needs for real food. For example, many Christians thinking of buying a vacation home might even pray, asking God practical questions such as "Can we afford it?" "Will it be too much work?" "Should we make an offer on this house?" These are good questions. But we seldom ask God heart questions such as "Will a second home elevate us above people?" "Will it isolate us?" In the first set of questions, God is your financial adviser. In the second set, he has become your Lord. You are abiding. You are feeding your soul with food that lasts.

We can do the same thing with a promotion. It feels selfish to pray for one, so instead we will work one! We end up separating a big part of our lives from God because we are trying to feel good about ourselves. As we have seen, we create two selves—a spiritual self and a material self. We also shy away from prayers like these because they invite God to rule our lives. They make us vulnerable. Like the crowds at Capernaum, we want breakfast, not soul food. Left to ourselves, we want God to be a genie, not a person.

Scholars have pointed out that Jesus' references to the kingdom are a subtle way of introducing himself as king. When we pray "Your kingdom come," we are saying "King Jesus rule my life." The heart is one of God's biggest mission fields.

We should include others in our quest for answers because we can mask our own desires with God, without realising it. It is easy to confess our sins to God but difficult to do it with others (Jas. 5:16). Consider this example of asking a friend for genuine advice by giving enough details so they can help you assess issues of the heart: *Bob, my wife and I would love to get a vacation home. You know how pressured life has been for us, and it would be great to get away to a quiet place to unwind. We have found this beautiful place near the lake which the whole family could enjoy. At the same time we are concerned what it might do to our hearts. We want to be followers of Jesus and he warns about building bigger and better barns. Is this a bigger and better barn? Is it a wise use of our resources? Will it elevate or isolate us from people? Will it be limiting what we can give to others? Will it distract us from local church and serving? At the same time we think we can use our house to give to people who can't afford holidays. Tell me what you think?*

Give enough additional data about what you can afford and how it will impact your giving and savings-that is, enough information for an informed opinion. One reason we don't ask our friend these questions is Western individualism.

When we need advice, we ask a wiser person and listen to the answer. We seldom think to do the same with God. Don't just ask God for guidance when making decisions but ask instead for wisdom. Wisdom is richer, more personal. I don't just need help with my plans, I need help with my questions and even my own heart. Asking God for advice only leaves us in control. Our age is on a quest for unlimited freedom and self-expression. Asking for wisdom is admitting we don't know or control the future but are willingly dependent on God for His wisdom-we want our true bread to come from heaven.

## Day 17: Your Kingdom Come

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Christians often think that “your kingdom come” relates only to religious or institutional events. But it properly relates to change in others, change in ourselves, and even change in things in the culture around us. To illustrate the first aspect, Miller uses the example of a husband praying for his wife to be less critical of him. It may be hard to pray for this for various reasons: 1) cynicism about the possibility of change; 2) it reminds you how much the criticism hurts; 3) may feel like you are trying to control your wife; or 4) it may expose your own weaknesses (she might be right!). Prayer opens the way for your heart to be exposed and submissive to God, which naturally changes your attitude and reveals ways you also need to change. Pray for God to bring change in your wife but pray for yourself as well. Ask God *Do I have a critical spirit too? Do I respond to my wife’s critical spirit with my own critical spirit?* Usually, what bugs us the most about other people is true of us as well. By first taking the beam out of his own eye (Mat. 7:1-5), the husband releases in his wife’s life the unseen energy of the Spirit. The kingdom is beginning to come.

Replace your critical spirit with a thankful spirit. A thankful heart is always extending grace because it has received grace. Love and grace are uneven. God poured out on his own Son the criticism I deserved. Now he invites me to pour out undeserving grace on someone who has hurt me. Grace begets grace. Praying steadily for his wife will help him become more aware of her as a person. Peter challenges husbands to treat their wives with “honour...since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Pet. 3:7). You can’t separate prayer from love.

Thirdly, believing the culture cannot be impacted and changed by God through our prayers is faithless. We must embrace the mysterious way God can use the prayers of many to effect change in large ways. Adults try to figure out causation. Little children don’t. They just ask. If you slow down and reflect, you will begin to see whole areas of your life where you have been prayerless.

## Day 18: Praying “Your Will be Done”

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Our will is strong and too often influences the direction of “Your will be done” (Matt. 6:10). Instead of committing our lives (circumstances, attitudes, others) to God, we deal with it all in a self-willed way. Doing the opposite, submitting it to God’s will through prayer, opens a “small door from my soul to God.” This helps us to discern and disown the self-will in our heart, and seeing the circumstances as being ordered from our sovereign God. The Sermon on the Mount gives a new view of the world that does not have your will or desires at the forefront. An example is a wife praying for her husband about his weaknesses and failures, rather than berating or trying to control him. The kind of understanding and surrender of heart that enables us to defeat our self-will and commit our lives to God is part of a praying life.

It is surprising how seldom books on parenting talk about prayer. We instinctively believe that if we have the right biblical principles and apply them consistently, our kids will turn out right. But that didn’t work for God in the Garden of Eden. Perfect environment. Perfect relationships. And still God’s two children went bad. Many parents, including myself, are confident we can change our child. We don’t surrender to our child’s will (which is good), but we try to dominate the child with our own (which is bad). Without realising it, we become demanding. We are driven by the hope of real change, but change occurs because we make the right moves.

Until we become convinced we can’t change our child’s heart, we will not take prayer seriously. Consequently, repentance is often missing. When we see, for example, our son’s self-will, we usually don’t ask *How am I self-willed?* Or *How am I angry?* We want God’s help so we can dominate our son. Often we begin by being demanding, and then as we encounter human self-will, we drift into despair. These two attitudes, of demand and despair, keep us from entering the story that God is weaving in the lives of our children (or any other person). If you are on the road of Good Asking-then you have also given up-but in a good way. You’ve given up on your ability to change other people. Instead you cling to God and watch him weave his story. “Frankly, Jill and I do our best parenting by prayer.”

## Day 19 Living in your Father's Story

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God wants to do something bigger than simply answer my prayers. The act of praying draws God into my life and begins to change me, the prayer-in subtle ways. Miller explains how praying for his one daughter “took the steam out of my tendency to fix her with quick comments. Because I was speaking to my heavenly Father about the potential drift of her heart, I could relax in the face of sin. Prayer softened me.

I often find that when God doesn't answer a prayer he wants to expose something in me. Our prayers don't exist in a world of their own. We are in dialogue with a personal, divine Spirit, who wants to shape us as much as he wants to hear us. For God to act unthinkingly with our prayers would be paganism, which says the gods do our will in response to our prayers. When someone's prayers aren't answered, I want to know the backstory. How long did that individual pray? What did God do in that person's heart when he or she prayed? What was God doing in the situation? Most of us isolate prayer from what God is doing in the rest of our lives, but God doesn't work that way. Prayer doesn't exist in some rarefied spiritual world, it is part of the warp and woof of our lives. Prayer itself becomes a story.

## **Day 20: Living in your Father's Story**

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God takes everyone he loves through a desert. The desert becomes a window to the heart of God. He finally gets your attention because he is the only game in town. You cry out to God so long and so often that a channel begins to open up between you and God.

The clear, fresh water of God's presence that you discover in the desert becomes a well inside your own heart. The best gift of the desert is God's presence. We see this in Psalm 23. As I go through "the valley of the shadow of death," He is with me. The protective love of the Shepherd gives me courage to face the rest of the journey.

Watchfulness alerts us to the unfolding drama in the present. It looks for God's present working as it unfolds into future grace. Watch for the story God is weaving in your life. Don't leave the desert. Corrie ten Boom's father often reminded "The best is yet to come."

## **Day 21: Listening to God**

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"How is God speaking into my life? What is God doing?" Miller relates a time of having a clear thought in answer to a self-posed question that God desired only to work on his character that year without setting other usual year goals. "Was God speaking to me that day of prayer, or was I just recording my own thoughts in my prayer journal? Did God prompt me or was it just my own intuition? He gives three reasons why he believes it was God: (1) the question and answer were immersed in God's Word, (2) the answer surprised him and was not typical of his own thoughts or desires ("It was distinctively his voice. It matched Scripture"), and (3) it came true. Having concluded that God does speak, Miller explores two common ways Christians go wrong when it comes to hearing God's voice in their lives.

First, some Christians are 'Word only' believers, who focus on seeing and hearing God ONLY in and through His written Word. If we think this way, "Our lives will lack the sparkle and immediacy of God's presence...if we believe Scripture only applies to people in general, then we can miss how God immediately personalises his counsel to us as individuals. Seeing God's activity in the details of our lives enhances the application of God's Word.

The second way a Christian might go wrong is by being a 'Spirit Only' believer, who elevates "human intuition to the status of divine revelation." When people call their own thoughts or feelings 'God's voice,' it puts them in

control of God and ultimately undermines God's Word. The problem is that the Holy Spirit comes in on the same channel as the world, the flesh, the devil. The Lord does lead-we just need to be careful that we aren't using the Lord as a cover for our own desires.

To correctly discern what God is speaking to us, we need to keep the Word and Spirit together. We need the sharp-edged, absolute character of the Word and the intuitive, personal leading of the Spirit. The Word provides the structure, the vocabulary. The Spirit personalises it to our life.

There is a tendency amongst Christians to get excited about 'listening to God' as if they were discovering a hidden way of communicating with God that will revolutionize their prayer lives...This subtly elevates an experience with God instead of God himself. The interaction between the divine Spirit and my own spirit is mysterious.