

DISCIPLINES OF DEVOTION

EDITED BY WINFREE BRISLEY



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Courtney
Reissig

“The Disciplines of Devotion series is a timely and valuable resource for women who long to grow in spiritual depth and maturity. With biblical insight and godly wisdom, each volume offers practical help for cultivating habits that lead us closer to Christ. I’m thankful for this series and eager to see how God will use it to strengthen and encourage the hearts of women.”

Melissa B. Kruger, author; Vice President of
Discipleship Programming, The Gospel Coalition

“These gospel-centered primers are saturated with scriptures that nourish the delight of knowing Christ. The accessible content, coupled with practical ideas and heart-oriented application questions, invites the reader to draw near to God through cultivating Spirit-empowered holy habits.”

Karen Hodge, Coordinator of Women’s Ministries,
Presbyterian Church in America; coauthor, *Transformed:
Life-Taker to Life-Giver* and *Life-Giving Leadership*

Prayer

Disciplines of Devotion

Edited by Winfree Brisley

Fasting, by Cassie Achermann

Prayer, by Courtney Reissig

Sabbath Rest, by Megan Hill

Prayer

Courtney Reissig

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Prayer

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Series Preface

ON A CHILLY JANUARY MORNING, two friends and I huddled around a coffee shop table to share life updates and prayer requests. One friend reflected on the previous year with frustration: “I feel like I didn’t accomplish anything.” The other friend and I, surprised by her assessment, rattled off a long list of worthwhile things she had done. But she persisted. It wasn’t that she truly believed she had accomplished nothing; it was that the things she had done weren’t the things she had hoped to do. Things she valued had been pushed aside by what seemed more urgent in the moment.

I could say the same, and I bet you could too. As women living in a do-it-all culture, we tend to

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have a lot on our plates. We juggle work, husbands, children, aging parents, and friends. We manage households, serve in the church, and volunteer in the community. Year after year, many of our goals and good intentions get pushed to the back burner—especially when it comes to spiritual growth.

We want to grow in relationship with the Lord. We want to know the Bible better, fight sin, and establish a consistent prayer life. But amid all the things we have to do, we often miss the one thing we really need. In Psalm 27:4 David said,

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

As king, David surely had many things to do and many things he might have asked of God. But he knew that what he most needed was to dwell with

the Lord. Similarly, Jesus explained to Martha in Luke 10:41–42 that she was “anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.” What was the one thing? Sitting at his feet, listening to his teaching.

As you consider your relationship with the Lord, are you more like David or Martha? Are you *devoted* or *distracted*? I suspect that many of us would admit that we identify with Martha’s distraction but also long for David’s devotion. So how can we grow in devotion to God in a world of endless distractions?

We see from both David and Martha that a life devoted to the Lord won’t happen by accident. David resolved to seek after God’s presence. Jesus suggested that Martha needed to sit down and listen. You see, discipline helps us grow in devotion.

In fact, throughout history Christians have used spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and Bible study to seek the Lord and grow in relationship with him. If the phrase “spiritual disciplines” sounds intimidating, don’t worry! It simply means practices

that promote spiritual growth.¹ And these practices can help you draw near to God whether you're a new believer or have been walking with the Lord for decades.

Perhaps the idea of cultivating a life of devotion to the Lord is new or confusing, and you don't know where to start. You have faith in Christ, but you're trying to figure out what it looks like to grow in relationship with him.

Or maybe you're going through the motions of spending time with God, but if you're honest, he feels distant. You want the Holy Spirit to warm your affections for the things of God and restore the joy of your salvation.

Or perhaps you have a vibrant relationship with the Lord, but you'd like to learn new ways to seek him. You've been wanting to try fasting or you'd like to learn about Sabbath rest.

Whatever your situation, the *Disciplines of Devotion* series was written for you. Each booklet explores

1 Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Nav-Press, 1991), 17.

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one thing—one practice to cultivate, one spiritual discipline to grow in—to help you draw near to the one true God. In each booklet, you'll gain a biblical understanding of a particular discipline and why it's worth cultivating. And you'll explore three practical ways to get started.

If you'd like to grow in these disciplines alongside other believers, we've included reflection questions to facilitate group discussion. Consider using this series in one-on-one discipleship, with a group of teens, in a neighborhood Bible study, or with a church small group. Also, Christians have a variety of perspectives on these disciplines, so if you'd like to continue your personal study, you can find a list of recommended resources at the end of each booklet.

When you finish this volume, let me encourage you not to set it aside in a pile of good intentions. These booklets can be read in less than an hour, but the disciplines they recommend can help you seek the Lord for a lifetime—even as you go about all the things you have to do.

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Preaching about the “one thing” David desired in Psalm 27:4, Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren observed, “Most of us seem, to our own consciousness, to live amidst endless distractions all our days. . . . But if we are true to the one purpose of serving and keeping near God, then we have a charm against the frittering away of our lives in distractions.”²

The *Disciplines of Devotion* series isn’t about productivity or efficiency or doing less. It’s about pursuing a life of devotion to the Lord in an age of endless distraction. It’s an invitation to “taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8) no matter how much is on your plate.

Winfree Brisley

SERIES EDITOR

2 Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Psalms* (Eerdmans, 1932), 146.

What Is Prayer?

PRAYER IS HARD FOR ME.

You may not have expected that to be the opening line of a resource on prayer. When we pick up books or resources on a topic, we typically want an expert opinion, tried-and-true tips, or something aspirational.

I'm not an expert, but of all the spiritual disciplines, prayer is the one I've seen God grow the most in my life in recent years. I've grown from someone who shrugged off my lack of fervor in prayer as "not my gift" to someone who looks forward to getting up early to pray—and praying all throughout the day.

God began this work in my life a few years ago when my pastor encouraged our church to make prayer a priority at the start of a new year. I usually dismissed such exhortations, seeing them as unattainable. *Prayer is not my thing*, I would tell myself. *We're all good at something when it comes to spiritual disciplines; prayer is not it for me*. But over time I couldn't shake a nagging conviction. God repeatedly exhorts us to pray in Scripture (Phil. 4:6; 1 Thess. 5:17; Heb. 4:16), so it wasn't something I could brush off as "not my thing."

If you struggle with prayer, let me assure you that you're not alone. I discuss the things that helped me later in the booklet, but for now, the point is this: While prayer might not come naturally to you, consistent prayer is not only possible but also necessary for your spiritual health.

For years, I wasn't willing to make changes for prayer to be a part of my daily life. But by God's grace, when my pastor challenged us, I was ready to seriously pursue growth in prayer. If you're at a similar crossroads with prayer, I hope this booklet

shows you that it's possible. If I can grow in this discipline, you can too. And I hope you'll find, as I have, that prayer doesn't have to feel like duty or drudgery—it can be a means of delighting in the Lord.

Let's look at prayer together.

Defining Our Terms

Before we get too far, it's helpful to know what I mean when I'm talking about prayer. Tim Keller helpfully defines prayer as “a personal, communicative response to the knowledge of God.” He adds, “Prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him.”¹

At its core, prayer is talking to God. To understand why we talk to God through prayer, we need to go back to the beginning. We need to understand God's original intent for us as his created beings.

¹ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (Penguin Books, 2016), 45, 48.

CHAPTER I

God created us for relationship with him. In Genesis, God walked in the garden he had made (Gen. 3:8). He talked to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28). But when Adam and Eve sinned, they could no longer be in God's presence (Gen. 3:22–24). And because we're sinful, we can't be in God's presence either. But God still wants a relationship with us. His desire to dwell among his people is the consistent story of Scripture from beginning to end.

In human relationships, what do you do when you want to have a relationship with someone but aren't with her in person? You talk to her. You interact through phone calls, letters, emails, and text messages, all the while planning opportunities to see each other in person.

There's a similar dynamic in our relationship with God. Right now we aren't with God. If we are in Christ, his Spirit indwells us, but we can't see him in the flesh. One day we will. One day Jesus will return, and God will dwell with his people forever in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1–4). Prayer is how we can talk to God in the meantime. He has spoken

to us in his word, and we speak to him in prayer. It helps us grow in relationship with him until we can be with him.

The Posture of Prayer

We have the opportunity to talk to God anytime, anywhere. He wants us to talk to him—he even commands us to talk to him—so why don't we? Why do we struggle to pray?

During Jesus's earthly ministry, people talked with him and came to him for healing and salvation. In a way, these men and women in the New Testament modeled prayer, how to talk to God.

Consider the father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus in Mark 9. This man came brokenhearted over his son. He was exhausted from saving his son from the demon's repeated attempts to harm him. First, he took his son to the disciples, but they couldn't cast the demon out. So he came to Jesus, and the scene was incredible. The demon was causing the son to convulse and foam at the mouth. The crowd grew around them, straining to see what

was happening and what Jesus would do. And you can imagine the pain in this father's voice:

“But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:22–24)

This father uttered only five words, but they are an example of the proper heart posture of prayer: “I believe; help my unbelief.” He didn't know exactly what to say, but he knew his need could be met only by Jesus. Only the desperate come to God for healing, salvation, and daily bread. You don't have to come with eloquent words, and you don't have to come with perfect faith. But you must know your need, or you will never come.

Making prayer a priority—a discipline—offers us a way to be daily reminded of our true condition. If you struggle to pray, take time to remember your need for God. Consider your dependence on God for every

breath. Consider your sinfulness and the even greater grace of Christ. Come to Jesus like this father, and ask him to help your unbelief: *Lord, I believe prayer is important. I know I need you. Help my unbelief. Help me pray.*

How God Helps

Praying for God's help to pray may sound odd, but it's a prayer we can offer with confidence. God doesn't give any command that he doesn't also give the necessary grace to live out. He will help us pray. In fact, he already has in his word.

We find examples of prayer all over the Bible. In the Old Testament, Hannah prayed for a son when she went to the temple to sacrifice (1 Sam. 1:10), and she praised God in prayer when her request for a son was answered (1 Sam. 2:1–10). Solomon prayed for wisdom (1 Kings 3:9). The prophets prayed to God on behalf of God's people. And David wrote many psalms, which are prayers of lament, worship, repentance, and thanksgiving. He also praised God even when one of his prayers was not answered the way he asked (2 Sam. 12:15–23).

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In the New Testament, we find many prayers that Paul wrote in his letters to the early church. And if there's ever a doubt that prayer is vital to healthy Christian discipleship, look no further than Jesus. He regularly withdrew from other demands to pray (Luke 5:15–16). He prayed early in the morning (Mark 1:35), and he prayed when he performed miracles (Matt. 14:19; Luke 9:16; John 11:41–42). He prayed not only in a time of deep emotional distress (Matt. 26:36–46) but also in the physical suffering of his crucifixion (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34; Luke 23:34, 46). Jesus truly prayed without ceasing. If Jesus needed consistent communication with his heavenly Father, so do we.

We can find help for how to pray in any of the recorded prayers in Scripture, but a good place to start is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 6:9–13, commonly called the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,

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your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.

There's not one "right" way to pray, but in the Lord's Prayer, we find scaffolding for our prayers. When we pray, we come with many needs. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to make God the focus of our prayers and let all our requests flow from his work and character. We can boldly approach him as our Father as we also reverence his name. Praying for the furthering of his kingdom and the supremacy of his will before addressing our needs helps put our requests in the right perspective. Asking for daily bread and for forgiveness reminds us that God cares about and ultimately provides for both our physical and our spiritual needs. And we are reminded that we must extend forgiveness to others. Finally, praying for

deliverance from evil reminds us that we must turn to the Lord and rely on him for resisting temptation.

I talk more about how to pray in the coming chapters, but for now remember this: God understands our weakness and our struggle with prayer. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer after the disciples said, "Teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). They admitted that prayer is hard—or that at a minimum they didn't know what to say. Jesus didn't rebuke them. Instead, he gave them words for their prayers. And he gave those words to help us too.

But Jesus does more than give us words we can pray. He is also praying for us (Rom. 8:34), and his Spirit is within us. Paul writes in Romans 8:26 that the Spirit "helps us in our weakness" because we don't always know what to pray. When we're at a loss, the Spirit is praying for us. When our words fail us, the Spirit never does. There isn't a prayer spoken (or left unspoken) that the Spirit doesn't guide and make complete by his power.

God expects us to talk to him because we're in a relationship with him. He wants us to bring our

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requests, offer praise, and confess our sins, but he doesn't leave us to figure it all out on our own. As we begin this journey of considering prayer together, let's make the disciples' request our prayer: "Lord, teach us to pray."

Reflection Questions

1. What has been your past experience with prayer (e.g., never tried it personally, done it inconsistently, have a thriving prayer life)?
2. What are some things that keep you from praying?
3. What are some things that motivate you to pray?

