



# STRONGER CLOSER BETTER

*“Revolutionizing Your Walk with God”*

DR. DHARIUS DANIELS

STRONGER  
CLOSER  
BETTER

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# INTRODUCTION

Some time ago, I began to experience mild discomfort in my back. I wasn't involved in any type of accident nor had I tweaked it with some freakish twist or turn; so I initially dismissed it and assumed it would subside. I assumed incorrectly. As time progressed, the mild discomfort escalated to stiffness and pain that made it difficult for me to sleep, sit, or stand for extended periods of time. However, I assumed the pain was episodic and periodic and would eventually go away. My apathy toward the challenges I experienced in my back did not improve the situation; it exacerbated them. Such is the case in life, *doing nothing does nothing*.

Hills don't get smaller just because we wait to climb them and pain doesn't get better when we choose to ignore it. As you probably would expect, the challenges in my back continued to the degree that I could no longer engage in recreational activities that I greatly enjoyed such as basketball and golf. At this point, I determined to identify and address the problem, so I set up an appointment to see a

physician.

After running several tests, the orthopedist informed me that I had a degenerate disc in my lower back. I asked him what were some of the contributing factors to this challenge and he responded by bluntly saying he didn't know. It could have been from years of playing basketball because of the constant leaping. Yet there are people who have played basketball much longer than I have and they don't have back issues. Therefore, he couldn't identify a specific cause but he did offer some guidance on how we could address my issues and it was through physical therapy.

I set up the appointment and soon realized that much of my physical therapy was centered around strengthening my core. I asked the exercise physiologist what my core had to do with my back, and she responded, "Everything!" She suggested that my back would feel better when my core got stronger. I thought this was an interesting and amazing insight. The pain in one area of my life could be addressed by strengthening another area of my life. My back was hurting but it could feel better if I got stronger in my core. So she began to teach me exercises that I was to engage in daily and consistently. Over time, as I followed her instructions, my

back greatly improved. At the time of this writing, I must confess: my back isn't perfect but it's better.

Before I imprison your attention with boredom from discussing my personal back issues, I'd like to offer a life lesson from my experience. I believe that we all have proverbial "back problems." We all have areas in which we experience pain and discomfort. We have areas that inhibit us from engaging in activities that bring us joy. You may not have a literal degenerate disc in your back but we all have a degenerating condition called our sin nature. It is the catalyst for our imperfections. Hence, we make imperfect decisions, express imperfect emotions, have imperfect relationships, and live imperfect lives. As a result, we deal with pain. We may have pain in different places and to different degrees but we have pain nonetheless.

I'd like to propose for your consideration that just as was the case with my back, that some of the pain we have in one place can't be dealt with until you strengthen another place. Could it be that just like me, you need to strengthen your core? I've learned that when people want my advice and guidance on their life, I ask them...how is your core? You can't have a good marriage without a strong core. You



can't have a good mind without a strong core, and we can't have a better life without a strong core.

Maybe you aren't experiencing any current pain or maybe you aren't aware of how your life may be limited because of the condition of your core. Trust me, even if these words aren't resonating with you because of what you are experiencing now, I would encourage you to strengthen the core because of your future. There is a day coming where, just like my back, you will face a situation that is so uncomfortable, you will wish you had strengthened your core.

When I use the word core, I'm not referring to your abdominal muscles (although that would be beneficial). When I say core, I'm referring to your inner life, your spirituality. Contrary to popular opinion, we aren't born with strong cores; we don't get them by being a "good person". Our core, our spirituality, is only strengthened when we engage in activity that strengthens it.

When I was going through physical therapy, there were very specific exercises that had to be done a very specific way to get the results that I needed. I'm not sure if you are aware of this, but spirituality works the same way.

As a matter of fact, listen to the words of the Apostle Paul. *1 Timothy 4:7 But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness.*

Notice what Paul says. He tells them to exercise themselves into godliness. The word exercise is the same word we use (in today's context) for a gymnasium. Paul is instructing his audience to do in their spiritual lives what people do in a gymnasium, work out!

Please allow me to be very candid and frank. We can't get in shape by going to a gym once a week and sitting in it and observing everyone else exercise. This doesn't work by osmosis. However, this is the way many people treat their spirituality. They attend a worship service in person or online and watch others exercise and are surprised when their core isn't strong. It doesn't work that way. There are some spiritual exercises that are called spiritual disciplines that are given to us in scripture. Just as is the case with my physical therapy, these disciplines must be done regularly but they must also be done the right way. When we do so, these disciplines help us become closer to God, stronger in our spirituality, and as a result, we will experience better lives.

This resource is your guide to what these spiritual exercises are and how to correctly engage them. It is a workout plan that works because it's the workout plan that Jesus worked. This resource is your blueprint to stronger, closer, and better. As you get closer to God, your core will become stronger, and as your core becomes stronger, your life will get better because you will get better.

*-Dharius Daniels*

## *Chapter 1*

# BODY SCULPTING

**I**n a recent New York Times article titled “Your Recycled Resolutions are a Boom for Business,” technology reporter Natasha Singer shared some insightful information about New Year’s Resolutions. In her research, she found that the average American views the new year as an opportunity to lose weight, get fit, quit smoking, fix their finances, organize their closets, and fix their life; so much so that Americans spent a collective \$62 billion on health club memberships, weight-loss programs and exercise tapes in one year alone. Memberships for these health clubs and fitness centers spiked every January, but by March, lines thinned at the treadmills and dieters relapsed. This is the trend in America. We start, we stop, then we wait until next year and we try again. When next year comes, we pay again. By March, we relapse again.

I’m sure you know of no one like this in your home, but perhaps you have heard of a “friend of a friend” who suffers from chronic incompleteness. Perhaps you have

walked into a gym before, and noticed someone who was built like a professional bodybuilder. On the one hand, when you see them, they are an inspiration. On the other hand, they are a painful reminder of how much work you have to do. If you stayed in the gym long enough to exercise, you probably watched them work out and noticed a few things in the process. You saw that the young man or the young woman was muscularly developed. You saw that they were strong and fit. From your assessment, they seem to exercise with ease and poise. But the truth is, they didn't get that way by accident. In order for anyone to have maintained a "perfect-beach body," they had to do some body sculpting. Some people are more physically fit because of their genetic predisposition, but all of us have to work at it in order to maintain it. The person you see in the gym had to do some bench presses. They had to do some curls. They also had to do some shoulder presses. They couldn't just work out one part of their body. They had to stretch even the weak areas to make sure their entire body was strong all the way around.

Although one's body may look fit, the major benefit of working out isn't your look, it's your strength. You gain muscle strength and endurance when you work out. You

breathe better when you work out. You have more energy to complete tasks when you work out. You can carry weight you couldn't carry before and you can carry it longer than you used to as a result of working out.

It's the same way spiritually. If I want strength, I can't get it without working out. The same way that a bodybuilder has to exercise different parts of his or her body to see a holistic result, we must do the same spiritually. We can't just pray and expect everything to change. We have to watch what we eat (spiritually speaking), balance our appetite, and exercise in such a way that we are doing it accurately and consistently. Here is what the scripture says about body sculpting:

*Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.1*

*Timothy 4:7–8 (NIV)*

Paul wrote the above epistle to his spiritual son and apprentice in ministry, Timothy. In the passage, Paul decides to clarify his point by using an analogy to aid and

assist him in educating his apprentice. The purpose of this athletic analogy is to push Timothy to a place of power. In the preceding verses, Paul tells Timothy what not to do and what to do. He tells him to avoid certain things and exercise other things. He also tells Timothy to have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales, and to dismiss any doctrine that is not rooted in biblical truth. In short, he says to Timothy: watch what you eat. Afterwards, he mentions the athletic analogy and tells him to train himself to be godly.

This text is no different than a fitness trainer in the gym. Trainers will first evaluate your goals, help you to design a regimen that works for you, and tell you what you should do and should not do in order to succeed. When Paul uses the word exercise in 1 Timothy 4:8, he uses the same word from which we get our English word gymnasium. Paul is powerfully proclaiming that if I want to be godly, then I have to get in the gym. Why? Because growing in godliness doesn't happen independent of intentionality. I must be intentional if I want to see results. There's no way around it. There's no way under it. In order to strengthen my relationship with God, I have to work out. There is no development without discipline.

In the next few chapters, permit me to be your pastoral fitness trainer. I want to walk you through the following exercises and introduce them to you briefly below. Theologians have written about these subjects for centuries, so this list is neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. But it is the beginning of a faith-fitness regimen that will, prayerfully, bring you closer to God.

Once you have a working knowledge of each discipline, use the remaining chapters of this book to delve deeper into each exercise with more specificity. My hope is that this resource will help you to evaluate where you are and where you want to be. No matter how strong you may be, all of us can become stronger in one area or another. And no matter how weak you may feel, everyone has to begin somewhere.

In the fitness gym of faith, here are the five most important exercises you will need to commit to with some realistic measure of consistency.

## **PRAYER**

What is prayer? Why is it important? Why must we pray? All of these are important questions that you will rediscover



new answers to, over and over again as you grow closer to Christ. Dr. Tony Evans defines prayer as “oral or mental communication with God the Father in the name of Jesus the son, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.” Prayer is the means by which we connect and communicate with an invisible God in a visible world. When we pray, we have direct access to God. We can tell the truth of who we are, how we feel, and what we need.

Why should we pray? We pray because intimacy only comes through prayer. Quite simply, people get closer when they talk to one another. If you have ever been in a significant relationship for any amount of time, you know this full well. The level of one’s intimacy is determined by the frequency of one’s conversation. The more you talk, the more you get to know one another. The more you get to know one another, the more you want to talk. Intimacy happens in prayer because you are not only talking to God, but God is speaking back to you. God speaks back to us through his Word. God illuminates our understanding when we pray. God leads you to certain people to receive revelation knowledge on next steps for life. We pray because intimacy comes through prayer.

Insight also comes through prayer. I have discovered in life that there are just some situations that I can't figure out intellectually. There are some things that can't be found in a book or on a computer. Prayer grants you divine insight into God's hidden truths. Prayer introduces you to wisdom from above. Prayer reminds you that God is smarter than us, and when we lack wisdom, we can go to God because he loves us too much to withhold anything from us.

Not only do intimacy and insight come through prayer, but so does intervention. God is a God of divine intervention, but in some matters, God will only intervene by invitation. Prayer invites God's participation into your situation. At times, God will require an invitation through prayer prior to him getting involved. James 4:2 corroborates this truth when the writer says, "You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God." Prayer is the quickest way to invite God into your situation.

*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. James 5:16-18*

## WORSHIP

To worship means to express worth. It is the act by which one expresses God's worth in their lives. Worship is so important to God that it was prioritized as the first of the Ten Commandments: *thou shalt have no other gods before me*. Why should we worship? We worship because we were created to do it. We were created for worship. Worship is where we thrive. The same way fish thrive in water and birds thrive in air, so too do we thrive in his presence. Worship ushers us into the presence of the Lord. Our lives are changed not just by the proclamation of the word, but by experiences in his presence. Psalm 16:11 declares, "in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." In God's presence we get joy transfusions.

In his presence, God speaks to us. When we worship, our hearts are dealt with, yokes and habits are broken, and the supernatural is experienced.

How do we worship? John 4 helps us with the *how* to question. Jesus proclaims, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” This means there should be a connection between one’s heart, one’s head, and one’s hands. All three are elements that are involved in worship. In order for worship to exist, reflection is a requirement. As you reflect, you should respond in a way that is consistent with how you feel. Now, songs aren’t the only way to worship, however, songs should help you to reflect and then respond (both privately and corporately). Thankfully, we live in an age where people can view church services online and worship in the comfort of their homes. And we praise God for the accessibility that technology affords! However, those avenues should be a supplement to, not a substitute for, the collective worship experience that the writer of Hebrews commands in Hebrews 10:25 should not be forsaken. Privatized Christianity isn’t biblical Christianity. We are born into a spiritual family that we are to grow with, serve with, and worship with when we are

able to do so. When we intentionally remove ourselves from these environments, we miss out on a beautiful encounter with God that can't happen in isolation.

## **SCRIPTURE READING**

When we spend time meditating on the scriptures, that does not mean we should simply memorize or reading scripture like a fairy tell or novel. The Scriptures are literally your spiritual food.<sup>1</sup> Peter 2:2 admonishes us with these words, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” Jesus corroborated this point when he declared, “man can't live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from God's mouth.” When we read scripture, we are committing to a spiritual life with a proper diet.

How often should we read Scripture? Regularly and consistently. Don't try to eat a week's meal in a day. Eat enough to digest. Eat until you are filled. Some of you reading this book are at the place in your spiritual walk with God where you can pick up the scriptures and read any chapter and verse and understand. Others of you are just beginning. But no matter where you are on the devotional spectrum,

when you hide the word in your heart on a daily basis, it will strengthen your faith and clarify your purpose.

## **FASTING**

Fasting is intentional abstinence from any form of physical gratification to achieve a greater spiritual goal. Why should we fast? Because if anyone is going to grow muscle, they must not only eat the right foods but they must also stop eating the wrong ones. Fasting helps us to eliminate the unhealthy distractions from our lives. What we hear and see matters. When we fast, we commit to an intentional time of clarity and concentration. Fasting increases your spiritual sensitivity, brings you closer to God, and strengthens your spiritual muscles by weakening the flesh. Everybody fasts differently, and that is OK. There are different types of fasts, total food fasts, partial food fasts, non-food fasts, and some will fast weekly, monthly or periodically. The key is to exercise this muscle as often as you need to, so that you can ultimately strengthen the weak areas of your spiritual life.

## SERVICE

Service includes the giving of your time, talent, and treasure to the work of God's church. Jesus modeled the imperative of service all throughout the gospels, and commanded us to emulate his activity.

*When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

*John 13:12–15*

Service is not just a way to *act like Jesus*. Serving actually *make us more like Jesus*. There is nothing that will hold you more accountable to applying spiritual truths than being in a situation where you have to deal with different people, different personalities, and you can't respond the way you would outside of church. Serving others teaches you how to extend grace, exercise patience, and show humility. It is just as spiritually formative as prayer, fasting, scripture reading, and worship because it helps you to see if you are

growing and helping others to foster growth.

Can you imagine the humility and love that Jesus had to possess to stoop down and wash his disciple's feet? He washed Peter's feet, the one who would deny him three times. He washed Thomas's feet, the one who would doubt the authenticity of his resurrection. This type of activity could not be accomplished by the immature. Serving is grown folks business; and your willingness to do it is an indication of your spiritual maturity.

As you begin this journey of getting closer to God, I encourage you to revisit the five disciplines of prayer, worship, scripture reading, fasting, and service. Before we elaborate further on these subjects, identify two disciplines where you feel you are the strongest, and identify two (or more) disciplines where you feel you are the weakest. Define each term in your own words, and then cross-examine your definition with the explanations we will provide in the coming chapters. If you are challenged to see these disciplines differently, reflect on that. Write down what sticks out to you, and most of all, do what the Scripture says. This is body sculpting for the believer. In order to experience holistic life-change, you will certainly need to sculpt your spiritual



temple the same way you would your physical temple. If prayer comes naturally to you but fasting does not, perhaps you will need to design a plan that focuses on your weaker areas with more concentration, while simultaneously giving attention to the other disciplines that matter to God as well. Only then will you experience a *stronger* relationship with God, a *closer* connection with Christ, and a *better* life in every area of your life.

## Chapter 2

# PRAYER CHANGES EVERYTHING

*“Nothing is well done without prayer for the simple reason that it leaves God out of the account.”* — E.M. Bounds,  
Weapon of Prayer

In the 1990's, the phrase “What Would Jesus Do” became a popular personal motto for adherents of evangelical Christianity. This phrase, often abbreviated, WWJD, was a reminder of the Christian moral imperative to model one's life after the example of Jesus. Asking the question is important, but asking what Jesus would do is only step number one. Knowing what Jesus did is step number two. Jesus did amazing things in his public ministry partly because of his private practices. No matter how many bumper stickers we have on our cars that boast our Christianity, and no matter the church we attend on Sunday morning, none of us can emulate Christ in public if we don't emulate him in private. What was the primary private practice that Jesus participated in most frequently? It's really no surprise. It's

prayer. Constantly and consistently, we see how and why Jesus developed a healthy and intimate prayer life.

### **LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY**

Prayer does not just change things...prayer changes everything. When we unpack the importance of prayer, we must begin with this undeniable fact. There are a number of awesome and appropriate definitions of prayer that we can consider to provide us with some perspective on this vital spiritual discipline. However, for the purposes of this book, I will restate Dr. Tony Evans' definition.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Evans defines prayer as "a believer's oral or mental communication with God the Father, through the authority of Jesus Christ, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit." It's a meaty definition that deserves a bit more unpacking. So let's do that here:

*Prayer is a believer's...* In other words, the prayer that honors God, and the prayer that God honors is the prayer of one who believes. We must believe that God exists. We must believe that God desires to hear from us, and we must

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<sup>1</sup>Tony Evans, *Tony Evans Speaks Out On Prayer*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000).

believe that He is willing to answer us. Being a believer is a prerequisite for prayer (Hebrews 11:6, Matthew 21:22).

*Oral and/or mental communication* means that prayer is a heart-to-heart dialogue between heaven and earth. In prayer, we are not just making requests but we are communing. Whether mentally or orally, in word or in deed, the word “commune” is a derivative of communication. Prayer is that deep place of holy fellowship with God where creation gets a chance to abide with the Creator, under the shadow of the Almighty and where God covers us and communes with us. John 15:4 says, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” When we are out of communion with God, we are not communicating to God.

*To God our Father.* When Jesus prays, he addresses the Father. He doesn’t pray to an ambiguous entity out there in the distant ethereal world. He prays to the Father, the first person of the Holy Trinity. An example of this is seen in John 17:1-5 *After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.* When Jesus teaches us to pray, he

instructs us to pray to the Father as well. The term “Father” is important because it is a relational term. It’s not meant to identify God with or relegate God to a specific gender. As our heavenly Father, God is a provider. God takes care of us. Therefore, he will see to it that our needs are met.

*We pray in the name, or authority, of the Son Jesus.* Because of sin and rebellion, we have been separated from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). Technically speaking, we don’t deserve access to the Father, and the book of Genesis tells us why we were put out of right fellowship in the beginning, but through Jesus Christ, our requests are escorted to the Father. That is why we pray in the name or in the authority of Jesus Christ. When we pray in His name, we pray in His authority, and He prays on our behalf. In John 14:13-14, Jesus promises to submit our prayers to the Father without a “return to sender” notification: *“and I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”*

*We pray with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.* When we cannot find the words to pray, and when we do not know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit assists us by planting desires on our heart. The spirit assists us and also intercedes for us

according to Romans 8:26-27 *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.* Praying with the Holy Spirit allows our prayers to be heard.

## **PRAYER CHANGES YOUR OUTLOOK**

*But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*  
- Luke 5:16

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.*  
Mark 1:35

*... Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.*

According to Luke 9:28, prayer changes our outlook. It also changes what you look like to others. Jesus transfigures in front of his disciples. He didn't change but his appearance changed. When you pray, it changes how you

respond to crisis. Prayer was such a priority to Christ that he removed himself from the noise of life in order to do it with intention. I'm sure many of us pray while driving, or pray while getting the kids ready for school, but how often do you retreat intentionally in order to focus on God and God alone? Prayer is so easy to do but so difficult to maintain. In order to witness its fruit, you've got to concentrate your energy and remove yourself from the noise of life. Jesus withdrew himself frequently to be refreshed in the presence of God.

## **PRAYER BRINGS DEAD THINGS BACK TO LIFE**

*So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."*

*John 11:41-44*

For some of us, Lazarus is a metaphor with a multiplicity of meanings. Your Lazarus could represent

a dead relationship, a dead business deal, a dead health prognosis, or a dead dream. But when we pray, we tap into power that can raise the proverbial Lazarus in our lives. I love that Jesus—who has all power—doesn’t boast in his power. If he wanted to, he could’ve performed this miracle without praying aloud. But he pronounces and announces what he is doing, and he tells others around him who is empowering him to do it because prayer is a testimony in itself. When we pray aloud, or share our prayers with others, it allows them to be introduced to the Resurrection and the Life. It allows onlookers to have something different to talk about during their lunch break. What if your current situation is stretching you to pray out loud? What if God wants to use this dead thing as an opportunity to resurrect someone else’s hope?

Prayer is a catalyst for the cultivation of intimacy with God. In other words, one cannot achieve intimacy without communication. You must talk. You must listen. Prayer is a non-negotiable. The journey to intimacy happens on the road called prayer. Therefore, we must pray. If you want to be close to anyone, you have to talk to him or her. With God, the same rule applies. The benefit of intimacy is that you will be able to hear better because you are closer. Prayer



brings you closer to God in such a way that it amplifies his voice by bringing down your voice. It's hard to make sense out of what someone is saying when they have to yell. But when we get close enough to hear him, we are positioned to receive counsel from him.

The benefits of prayer are abundant. Prayer puts us in a position to receive divine counsel. Prayer also postures us for self-correction. When we remain in the posture of prayer, God can deal with us about certain things so that other people won't have to. Look at what Jesus says in Luke 11:

*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation*  
*- Luke 11:1-4*

After witnessing Jesus pray, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to do it. What's amazing about this question is that they were all Jewish men, many of whom had been praying their entire life. But they were exposed to something

greater in Jesus, which then created a new appetite for something they had always done. They were humble enough to ask for help. Many of us are just like the disciples in Luke 11. We may have learned about prayer in elementary school or in Sunday school, but now it is time for Jesus to teach us.

Luke does not give as much detail as Matthew. In Luke, Jesus just teaches them what we know as the Lord's Prayer. However, Matthew's account suggests that before Jesus goes into the Lord's Prayer, he gives his disciples some preliminary instructions. He begins by telling them what not to do and who not to emulate. A key component of perfecting our prayer life is in unlearning practices that are not rooted in the revelation of scripture. Jesus says, when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites (Matthew 7:5-8). He says this because he doesn't want us to become so consumed by the desire to impress people that we never talk to God. Nor does he want the eloquence of our prayers to ruin the sincerity of our prayers. The goal of prayer is to reach the ear of God, not to impress the ears of others. Prayer is about communion, it's not an audition.

By looking at Matthew 6 and Luke 5, I see four important ways to enter into the prayer room. We must do it

with sincerity, secretly, soberly, and expectantly.

Sincerity means you should talk to God respectfully but not formally. Be open and honest with God because he loves you where you are, as you are. If you have children, do you want them to ask for sneakers by saying “oh majestic parents of mine earthly and domestic inheritance; without you, I cannot transport myself to and from the institutions of higher learning,” or do you prefer that your children say “dad, can I get some sneakers?” The same is true with God.

Praying secretly does not mean you refuse to let people know you are praying and it doesn't mean you can't tell people about the content of your prayers. To pray in secret means to shut out all distractions. It means getting in an environment or creating an environment of solitude (*Matthew 6:6*). If Jesus withdrew to places of solitude and secrecy to pray, then so must we. When we create a secret hideaway to dialogue with God, it becomes “our special meeting place,” and God is faithful to meet us every time.

When we pray soberly, this simply means that we pray in the right frame of mind. God wants open and honest dialogue, but he also wants thoughtful meditation and reflection. In short, *think about what you pray about.*

There is nothing wrong with pausing to figure out how to say what you want to say. There's nothing wrong with writing down your prayers so that the accuracy of your heart can be reflected in and through your words. Matthew 6:7 advises us not to use vain repetitions with our lips when there is no connection with our hearts. The word vain repetitions can be transliterated as "battalogo" which means babbling or speaking without thinking. Do you know someone who speaks before they think? They say a lot but do not really communicate anything? This is what Jesus is alluding to. Praying soberly means to think about what you pray about.

To pray with expectation means to pray with assurance. It's O.K. to expect an answer because God has promised us one. (Matthew 6:8) What good is praying if you don't believe the Father hears you? The best part about prayer is that God is faithful to hear us and answer us. How that answer shows up has all to do with our sensitivity to his voice and the intimacy we have developed over time. As well, faith plays an amazingly important role in our prayers (*Mark 11:22-24*) but again, it is important that you pray with excitement, anticipation, and expectancy. After you pray, pay attention to the many ways God may want to speak to

you. Open your eyes and be ready to rejoice when you see the answer—no matter if God says yes, no, or not yet.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

Pop quiz time. I'd like you to answer each question openly and honestly. Consider jotting down your answers in the margins of this book, or in a journal for deeper reflection.

*How often do you pray?*

*When you pray, what do you say?*

*Is prayer an ecclesial mandate or a guilty pleasure?*

*Do you enjoy it as much as Jesus did, or does it feel like a chore?*

By the end of this journey, I hope you will see and understand prayer differently. I pray that your love for God will be rekindled and that the Holy Spirit will stir up your appetite and enable you to pray not for results, but for communion.

## Chapter 3

# MARY IN A MARTHA WORLD

*“If you can’t find God, start worshipping and He will find you!”* — Chris Hodges, Pastor of the Church of the Highlands

I once heard a preacher say, “When the enemy cannot make you bad, he will make you busy.” In my opinion, this is particularly true in 21st Century America. Around the world, Americans are known as busy people. We have a reputation for being overworked, overstressed, and overwhelmed. According to the Center for American Progress, “86 percent of U.S. men and 67 percent of women work more than 40 hours a week, and American families worked an average of 11 hours more per week in 2006 than they did in 1979.” I can’t imagine what that statistic is now. And though the shift has helped companies cut expenses and increased U.S. productivity, a growing number of studies show that the extra work is negatively affecting our health,

family lives, and effectiveness at work.<sup>2</sup>

## WORSHIP MATTERS

All throughout Scripture, we see how important worship is to God. Cain and Abel offered sacrifices of worship in Genesis. One was accepted and one was not. Noah built an altar and worshipped the Lord minutes after exiting the ark. Moses was instructed to go to Pharaoh and command him to let God's people go so that they could worship. The Israelites were not freed so they could live a boundless and futile life absent of accountability. They were freed to worship. They were liberated from bondage so that they could become, like Paul, a prisoner of the Lord. When God gave commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the first commandment given was about worship: *you shall have no other God before me*. Worship is important to God.

Worship should also be important to us. But throughout Scripture, we see how difficult it is to honor God

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Yoder, "Is America Overworked?" The Fiscal Times: <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/Articles/2012/02/16/Is-America-Over-worked>

on the one hand, and handle life on the other. Consider this passage in Luke 10:

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.*

*She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better; and it will not be taken away from her." - Luke 10:38-42*

These verses paint a picturesque portrait of someone who is busy being busy. Martha has allowed the work for the Lord to distract her from the Lord of the work. She is so busy preparing for her Guest that she forgets to worship the Master. She is so distracted by cooking, cleaning, and fixing her house, that she neglects to sit at His feet. Mary, on the other hand, has chosen what is better. She knows Jesus will not dwell in her home forever. She knows that the Master's



presence is more important than the particulars on her To Do List. So she pauses and she worships.

The challenge for us is to learn to become Mary in a Martha world. Life will not get simpler because you decided to get stronger in your walk with God. If anything, life will become more complex as you attempt to add time to “exercise your spiritual muscles” and remove time from other things you enjoy. But if we want a stronger connection with God, a closer intimacy with God, and a better life, we’re going to have to prioritize worship in the midst of a busy world.

This hasn’t been easy for me, but I have learned the importance of pausing to worship all throughout my day. When I wake up in the morning, I have concentrated devotional time with God. I typically journal 3 times per week, and I begin my morning meditation listening to a worship song that reminds me of God’s worthiness. I speak to God as if I am talking to a close friend. I sandwich my prayers of thanksgiving and words of exaltation with scripture reading and verse memorization. My morning time with God has become a kind of secret place. I love to be in God’s presence. But because I am a pastor, and because the nature of my assignment requires me to be able to respond to

several different spiritual needs every day, I can't just depend on my morning meditations with God. I need to insert at least two or three more concentrated times into my schedule, every day, to express worth to God. I often tell my staff that by 12 noon, all of my Jesus juice has run out. All of my spiritual energy is exhausted before lunchtime so in order for me to be my best self, and in order for me to live, love, and lead like Jesus, I have to do what Jesus did in Matthew 14:22-23.

*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone.*

Jesus dismissed the crowd, sent his disciples away, and went up to the mountain to spend some quality time with the Father. If Jesus, who is fully divine, recognized the importance of removing himself from the busyness of life to be replenished by God's presence, then we must do the same. If we want to live a better and more balanced life, we must do what Jesus did in private in order to thrive the way

Jesus did in public.

Practically speaking, this means that you must learn to manage your life in such a way that you tell your time where to go. I learned this principle a long time ago and it has proven to be true. If you don't control your time, your time will control you. For me, this means that if I want to prioritize worship every day, I can't allow my assistant to schedule meetings back-to-back. No matter how important the meeting may be, if I am not fully attentive and fully present in the meeting, it really won't matter in the end. So I have to buffer my meetings with space in between to pray, reflect, and worship. Some days, I can enjoy an extended period of worship. Other days, I may only have five or ten minutes to hit the reset button and enjoy the presence of God. But I have seen the benefits of doing so in my personal and professional life. If it matters to God, then it should also matter to you.

For you, this may mean you will wake up 15 minutes earlier than usual, or stay up a little later than you normally do. You may decide to use your lunch break at work as intentional time with God. While driving to school or commuting to campus, you may decide to sanctify your

travel time as worship space. This will be the time for you to reflect on God's goodness, sing to the Lord, and enjoy the experience of his presence. I'll say it again: if it matters to God, then it should also matter to you.

## **WHY WORSHIP?**

Why-power is greater than will power. In other words, why you decide to do something is greater than the will to do it in the end. Often, we may have a strong desire to do something for a short period of time, but after a while, our will to do it will expire. For this reason, we need more than willpower. We need why power. We need to know why something matters. We need to explore the deeper implications of the task set before us, so that we can continue our commitment long after the excitement wears off. Some people have the willpower to go to work (for example), but if their why expires, they will soon lose the zeal to show up with purpose, excitement, and drive. The same is true for worship. Not only should we worship because God commands it. It is also important to know why we worship.

Dave Hunt defines worship in this way, “worship is the heart poured out in gratitude and awe, expressing our

appreciation of Who He is and what He has done for us by His grace through Jesus Christ.” Pastor Louie Giglio asserts, “Worship is simply giving God his breath back.” These two definitions are two beautiful expressions that describe the sacredness and fulfillment that worship provides. When we worship, we express worth to God. We give to God the glory due his name. We give to a God who does not need us and does not depend on us. In fact, nothing we do can add any more value to His majesty, but since God breathed life into us, worship is the only appropriate response to say thank you. Reflect on that for a moment. You serve a God who doesn’t need you, but longs to be with you; and as you worship, you get to express worth to Him.

Worship is a spiritual discipline that requires intentional engagement with God. It is also a demonstration of corporate gratitude, which is equally as important as private worship. In John 4 we encounter a woman in Samaria who thinks she knows worship better than the God who created it. Jesus meets her at Jacob’s well, and they embark on a conversation about the true nature of worship.

*The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

*“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” John 4:9-14*

As this woman speaks with Jesus, she tells him where the Jews worship and where people like her worship. But Jesus explains that worship is not a place; it's a posture. By doing so, he reorients her understanding about her worship because he knows the location of your body is not more important than the posture of your heart. Jesus knows what many of us are still learning—namely, that it doesn't matter where you are; if your heart is not postured toward God, then

you have missed the essence of worship.

This is what Christ says the Father is seeking for in John 4. God wants a heart after him. When we worship the Lord, we engage Him with intention and reverence. When we worship the Lord, we concentrate our lives on the Supreme Being. In an age ripe with idolatry and a compulsive need to place people on the altar of our hearts, where only Christ belongs, worship is a Christian imperative. It must be a daily part of our lives. In prayer you can be you. In worship you can forget about you.

Worship is more than affection; it is the acknowledgement of God's invaluable worth and a commitment to express that worth by placing Him above all else. Worship reveals where our allegiances lie. No one in a relationship wants affection without allegiance, and it's the same way with God. When you value someone, you demonstrate your valuation of them by committing to them both privately and publicly.

## **PRIVATE AND PUBLIC WORSHIP**

Private worship and public worship are equally important. Many are comfortable with and emphasize the significance

of private worship. It's a beautiful and intimate space carved out for you and God. However, I am noticing a growing trend that deemphasizes the significance of necessity for public and collective worship. As a pastor, I often hear the claim, "I can worship at home," which is true but troubling at the same time. Why? Because worshipping in the comfort of one's home should never replace the collective worship experience that the writer of Hebrews clearly says should not be forsaken (Hebrews 10:25). Online services and accessible technology should be a supplement to, not a substitute for, public worship. You have been born into a spiritual family. As such, we grow with, serve with, and worship with one another and that kind of community produces a beautiful encounter with God that can't happen in isolation.

Imagine if the people who gathered in the Upper Room during Pentecost decided to stay home. What would've happened or not happened if they said, "I can do this on my own"? There is something inexplicable about corporate worship that changes our perspective and drives us closer to God. Jesus knew this, which is why He would frequent the temple. It's interesting—in one instance Jesus enters into the synagogue to turn over tables (Matthew 21:12). He knew



there was corruption going on in the temple, but He never stopped going! If Jesus did not use the imperfection of the synagogue as an excuse to abandon corporate worship, how can any of us use the imperfection of the church to do the same? Indeed, corporate worship experiences bring us closer to God and closer to our community. I've experienced this countless times in my own life and witnessed it in the lives of others. When you prioritize public worship, the collective worship experience will create a welcoming environment for God's presence. Being in the midst of other worshippers who can cry with you, pray for you, and be present with you, is an experience God doesn't want any of us to miss out on.

## **WORSHIP REFLECTION**

What will you do tomorrow to improve your worship core? In the space below, write down a worship plan that includes a daily concentrated moment with God (whether in the morning, on your way to work, or otherwise), and identify an accountability partner who will help you to keep your commitment. Immediately you will see life-changing results. Next, identify a few worship songs that can assist you during private worship moments. At Kingdom Church, we

intentionally sing songs that are vertical in nature. That is to say, we select songs that focus on God and not us. Our songs remind us of God's faithfulness, majesty, and worthiness. I encourage you to add some of the songs you hear during corporate worship into your daily music library. Finally, think about how much time you spend in God's house. How often do you engage God publicly with other brothers and sisters in Christ? If you attend each Sunday, make a commitment to add midweek worship to your schedule. If you attend twice a week, consider joining a small group or attending a special event that our church is offering. If you typically attend on Easter and Christmas, make a commitment that you will try to come more often over the next 90 days. No matter where you are on the worship spectrum, Jesus is calling each of us to intensify our worship so we can strengthen our core.



## Chapter 4

# LIVING BY BREAD ALONE

*“The scriptures do not change, but we do, and so the same scriptures can give us new insights every time we read them.” — Mervyn B. Arnold*

For better or for worse, I tend to be a traditionalist about some things. When I first started preaching, for instance, I always mounted the pulpit with a leather-bound Bible. I loved my commentary-filled, yellow highlighted, red underlined and black-circles-around-the-emphasis-verses Bible. There’s just something special to me about preaching from an actual Bible that you just don’t get with printed-paper, three ringed binders, or fancy technology. But over the course of time, I admit I have evolved. What I now hold in my hand when I preach is a product appropriately dubbed an I-Pad. The I-Pad is a creation of a creator. The product did not create itself and hence, does not know how to get the best use out of itself. Therefore, the product comes with a manual.

In this manual are details that describe how the product is supposed to work and how to get the best use out of it. The manual contains some dos and the manual contains some don'ts but the dos and don'ts are in the best interest of the product. The prohibitions, for example, are not present for the purpose of restriction; they are present for the purpose of protection. In the I-Pad manual, the creator restricts users from placing the electronic device near water. Its proximity to water has the potential to damage its usage, and thereby, can destroy the functionality of the device. This is no different than other manuals. If a manual says, "Don't put the television in the kitchen sink" we understand why the manual says such things. We don't see this disclaimer as restrictive; we see it as protective. So, I am very clear about one thing concerning this I-pad. If I follow the manual, the product will last longer than it could have lasted and do better than it could have done. What I am also clear about is that the one who designed the product is not the one who composed the manual. That is to say, if Steve Jobs invented the I-pad (for example), he did not sit down and write every rule and regulation himself for the use of said I-pad. More accurately, the creator of the product arranged for the manual

to be written by someone else, maybe even a team of writers. As the owner of the product, he probably oversaw the writing of the manual to ensure that it reflected the truth, but Jobs didn't pen every word of the manual himself. Nonetheless, the manual is still considered accurate even though the designer didn't compose it. Here's my point: just because the creator didn't use his hands to write it, doesn't mean it isn't right.

I hope you know by now that I am not just talking about an I-pad. I am using the I-pad as a metaphor for the Bible. I just contemporized a couple of statements that Paul made to his spiritual son, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:16. Paul wrote, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." By this statement, I believe Paul was arguing that God is our creator, we are his creation, and the Bible is the manual that tells us how to get the best out of us.

The Bible is God's operation manual for human life. God, who is the originator of all things creation, had the Bible written for our protection and guidance. In this sacred text are words of truth and wisdom. In this holy document are biblical characters who teach us about the abundant life

that Jesus promised us. It is the roadmap toward destiny. And when we do not read it, we don't have clear direction.

This is why Paul tells Timothy to continue in what he has learned. From childhood, Timothy was acquainted with the sacred writings. Paul then goes on to say the scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation. The scriptures have the potential to arrest ignorance and impart the kind of wisdom necessary for salvation. But here's the key: all scripture, not some, but all, is God breathed. It's the same imagery that is used to describe how God created the human species. God breathed into mankind and we became a living soul. And just like God breathed life into man, God breathed the scriptures. The essence of God was in the man and the essence of God is in the scriptures. Therefore when men wrote the scriptures, they believed God's spirit was giving them the words to write. God was the "creator of the product," and inspired others with his spirit to write the manual (The Bible) the same way someone else wrote the manual for my I-Pad.

Listen to what Paul says: *"This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words."* 1 Corinthians 2:13. This is a consistent view of

those who wrote the Bible. David said the word was a lamp. *Psalms 119:105 - Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.* Paul said the word was a weapon. *Ephesians 6:17 - Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* James said the word was a mirror. *James 1:23-24 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.* Jesus said the word was a Rock. *Matthew 7:24 Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* Jesus also said the word is truth. *John 17:17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.* And because the Word is truth and God breathed, the Scriptures are profitable and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. Quite simply, reading the Scriptures will strengthen your faith and help you to live the way the Creator intended you to live.

## **BUILD YOUR LIFE UPON GOD'S WORD**

Of all the disciplines we will review in this book, Scripture reading is, by far, one of the most important. Scripture reading



is an anchor that keeps you grounded when life happens. Meditating on God's word allows you to proactively prepare for unexpected storms or unforeseen circumstances. Because the Word of God is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Psalm 119:105), we are able to see more clearly every day that we read it. But when we do not read His word, or if life becomes too cluttered by circumstances and obligations, then we will inadvertently bump into things we would've been able to see if we had turned on the light of God's word.

The best example to prove this point is found in Matthew 4 when Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil:

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written*

*"He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike*

*your foot against a stone. Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

Notice how intentional the devil is when he approaches Jesus. The tempter does not appear when Jesus first begins his wilderness journey. He does not appear in the middle of the experience. Instead, the tempter waits until Jesus has fasted for forty days. By this point, Jesus is vulnerable. He is open. He is hungry. Imagine how hungry you might be if you resisted food for a little over a month. This is when the devil strategically enters into the scene to tempt Jesus. But Jesus counteracts every temptation with the Word of God. When the devil tempts Jesus by telling him to turn stones into bread, notice what Jesus says and what Jesus doesn't say. Jesus says, "It is written." Jesus never said, "I don't want any bread." Surely, Jesus wanted some bread. He had been fasting and he was hungry. But instead of

telling the devil what he wanted, Jesus prioritized the Word over his wants. This is powerful because many of us expect temptation to come wrapped in something we don't want. If you don't want it, it's not temptation. If it's not something you like, it wouldn't have the potential to distract you. But in the face of what you want, Jesus teaches us to stand on the Word of God. Jesus teaches us to submit to God, resist the devil, and watch him flee. Jesus shows us, in real life, what to do in the face of spiritual starvation. We must dig deep and search long for a Scripture that can keep us afloat when we feel like giving up. When we are sick, we must find a word that reminds us that "God heals all our diseases" (Psalms 103:3). When we feel bombarded by ongoing threats from antagonizing voices, we must find a word and declare, "No weapon formed against me shall prosper" (Isaiah 54:17). The enemy of your soul does not respond to your words. The enemy responds to His Word. Knowing the Word of God and studying His word will save you from a life filled with distractions and deception. Meditating on his word, both day and night, will usher you into a life of success:

*“This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.” Joshua 1:8*

## **READING THE WORD GROWS YOU UP**

Why should we read Scripture? Because it is a rock, a lamp, the truth, and our hope. In the midst of a windy and turbulent season, the Word is your anchor that causes your foundation not to waver. Being a Christian doesn't inoculate you from life experiences. But the Word of God will protect you from imminent destruction. The Word of God will remind you of who God has ordained you to be, even when others attempt to mislabel you or disparage you. The Word will give you assurance of God's plans for your life, even during difficult days when it seems like God has forgotten about you. The Scriptures are food for our souls.

*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. 1 Peter 2:2-3*

As babies, it is impossible to grow without the nutrition that comes from milk. As you grow older, the same milk that was used to develop you is now strengthening your muscles. The more strength you have, the more weight you can carry. So reading the Word is more about helping you to carry the weight of your life and less about doing it so others can notice you.

It's impossible to read the Scriptures and not grow up. Each time you read the Scriptures, they will help you to grow in salvation. Most certainly, you will begin to see life in a different way. Studying the Scriptures also impacts us by giving us nourishment from a spiritual perspective. Each time you commit to reading the Word, you gain the spiritual energy and strength to live like Christ. Jesus was clearly a student of the Scriptures. His vast knowledge of them communicates we too should make the study of Scripture a priority. His accusers could not trip Him up because He committed himself to speaking in the language of His Father. He always prized what the Father said over what He wanted to do.

## **RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD**

The more I see how Jesus interpreted Scripture, the more I recognize the need to not just talk about Scripture reading, but also to discuss Scripture interpretation. Very often Jesus had to correct the practices of the religious leaders of his day as a result of them misinterpreting the meaning of Scripture. Second Timothy 2:15 calls this “rightly dividing the word of truth” (KJV). Many wars have started because of misreadings of Scripture. Many lives have been abused because someone took one scripture out of context or decided to make the Bible say something God never meant when it was written. For that reason, it is important for you to develop a regimen of studying the Scriptures with humility, in honor, and with a hermeneutic of love.

By humility, I mean we should never leave the posture of a student when we study God’s Word. Even if we are teachers of the Word, we are and should always be students first. When we operate with this paradigm, it reduces the likelihood of our arrogantly approaching the Bible in ways that lead to us leaving with our own conclusions instead of God’s. We must resist the temptation to read God’s Word through our own logic and desires. Why? Because God is

smarter than us. Reading with humility means you pray and ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your understanding. Reading with humility means you place your heart in a teachable posture. Never be too proud to ask your spiritual leader for help in understanding the Scriptures. And on a practical level, reading with humility means not suffering through translations of the Bible you don't understand. If the King James Version is too archaic for you, there are so many other versions at your disposal that will help you to have a better understanding.

We should also approach the Scriptures with honor. Reading Scripture with honor means never forgetting this is a sacred text. The Holy Scriptures are fundamentally about a holy God and His plan to save an unholy people from their sins. When we do not honor the sacred worth of this text, we treat God's Word like any other book. We consult it the same way we turn to a self-help book. This is not to say that God can't speak through other documents. God can reveal Himself in anything He created because all of creation testifies to his existence. But the Holy Bible is different than other texts. The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of this text to produce this manual for our lives. When we lose honor for

the holiness of the Scriptures, something important gets lost.

Scripture should be read with a hermeneutic of love. Each time you read it, you have to remember God loves you. Everything you read must be seen through this lens. If you had a strict guardian growing up, he or she may have made you feel nervous when walking into a room. When they approached you, you may have hid because you thought they would speak forcefully to you. If they were intimidating guardians, then implanted in your psyche was the assumption that you were bad at your core, and therefore, anything they said, you heard it with an ear bent toward self-condemnation. Many people approach the Scripture in the same way. We assume God is mad at us and wants to punish us. But this is the furthest thing from the truth. Reading the Bible with a hermeneutic of love means God ultimately wants you to win. His love is wide. His grace is deep. His justice is for your peace. His commandments are for your protection. He does what He does and He says what He says because He wants you to flourish. Whenever you read Scripture, see yourself as the apple of God's eye—because you are!



## **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR STRENGTHENING YOUR STUDY**

If you desire to study the Scriptures more often than you do right now, here are some practical ways to strengthen your study habits. Firstly, commit to studying every day. If a vitamin a day keeps the doctor away, then a verse a day keeps the distractions away. David said, “thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against you.” To me, this verse means that the more word you hide in your heart, the less likely you will be overtaken by sin. We all fall short. We all miss the mark. But a daily commitment to studying God’s word every day will increase your awareness and sensitivity. Secondly, set a regular time every day to study God’s word. Life is busy. Things happen all of the time. But do your best to schedule a consistent study session with God. Maybe that can happen in the morning before your family wakes up. Maybe you can carve out five minutes before you start your day at work. But consistently commit to a regular time each day that works for you. Thirdly, study in a location free of distractions. Jesus commands us to pray in a secret place and shut the door. In the same way, when we

read Scripture, if we really want to benefit from the blessing of devotional time with God, we should also study in a place where we can truly focus on what we are reading. Avoid high volume environments if noise distracts you. Locate a serene environment that helps you to clear your mind. Maybe you can schedule some time at a local park or near water. Wherever you study, be intentional about removing yourself from distracting environments. Fourthly, prepare yourself to listen to the Spirit before you start reading. This is intimate time with God. When you are reading his word, you are preparing your spirit to be fed by the Creator. No meal is cooked without proper preparation. Water must be boiled. Ovens must be preheated. Ingredients must be sliced and mixed. In the same way, do not rush into your study time. Prepare yourself. Quiet your spirit. Focus your thoughts. Be fully engaged in the moment in which you are about to partake. Finally, study for a period of time rather than reading a certain number of chapters or pages. This may not work for everyone, but I always encourage the members at Kingdom Church and beyond to read the Bible to feed, don't read the Bible to finish. That is to say, don't become so focused on finishing a chapter that you forsake the subtle

pauses of the Holy Spirit when he wants you to slow down and focus on a word, a sentence, or a passage. Again, this is not a fairy tale novel. This is a manual for life. The way you read will determine how well you receive.

## **SCRIPTURE REFLECTIONS**

When you think about your personal commitment to reading scripture, reflect on these final questions as we culminate this chapter: is the reading of scripture a part of your daily routine? When you read it, do you read to understand or do you read to finish? Do you read for your head or for your heart? Answering these questions will help you to grow the way Christ wants you to grow. To Jesus, the Word was bread to Him. It fed His soul and helped him to survive the hunger pangs of temptation. In what areas do you need the Word of God to help you to grow?

## Chapter 5

# LIVING BY BREAD ALONE

*“Fasting isn’t about inflicting pain upon our bodies and it’s not about removing sin from our lives—the latter would be repentance and should not be limited to a season. Biblical fasting is a withholding of things—good things—that have taken a too-important role in our lives. Fasting is about dependence.” — Raechel Myers*

I recently bought a dog. Over the course of my lifetime, I’ve had dogs in my home but I had never been responsible for them. I also recall not doing very well with them. My family and I travel frequently. We move rapidly and the nature of our fast-paced life has inhibited our ability to provide the attention that dogs need. However, in an attempt to bring some more balance to my life, I decided that I would buy a dog for which I would become primarily responsible. I would feed the dog, I would walk the dog, and I would clean up after the dog; not exclusively, but primarily. So, I bought a toy poodle that I named Gi-Gi.

Initially, I was excited about the opportunity to be

the primary caregiver to the dog but my excitement soon faded away. After several months of being in my home, Gi Gi began barking all night, running away from me, refusing to follow instructions, refusing to be properly potty trained, etc. After frequent frustrating experiences, I decided that I was inadequate in my ability to care for dogs. I considered throwing in the towel and blessing someone else with Gi Gi. One of the members at the church heard of my predicament and said to me, “Pastor, you know my husband is a dog trainer, let him help you.” At first I was reluctant but eventually I yielded. Her husband came over to our home and in 20 minutes, he had the dog doing things she wouldn’t do for me in 5 months. He then told me what my problem was: I wasn’t training the dog, the dog was training me.

I wasn’t leading the dog, the dog was leading me. When Gi Gi barked, I came to her. When she ran, I chased after her. So the trainer taught me how to talk to Gi Gi with some bass in my voice. He taught me how to handle the leash so that she would learn to walk at my pace as opposed to me walking at hers. He taught me how to teach her to not only sit but to stay until I said come. He taught me how to control that which had been controlling me.

You may be wondering how this story connects with the subject of this chapter: fasting. It's quite similar if you ask me because you may not have a Gi Gi in your home but you have a Gi Gi in you. There is a part in you and a part in me that likes to bark when we need to be quiet. There is a part in us all that refuses to follow instructions and runs from our master. For this reason, we need training. We need to submit to God the way Gi Gi learned to submit to me. We need to deny the parts of us that want to misbehave. We need to starve unhealthy desires and impulses. We need to control it before it controls us; and there is no greater way to gain control over your flesh than to fast.

## WHY FAST?

*Moses fasted. Elijah fasted forty days. Paul fasted fourteen days. Jesus fasted forty days. If the children of God do not fast, how will we ever fit into the armor of God? Fasting is not a requirement; it is a choice. It is a vow you choose to make to pursue God on a deeper level. The entire time that you are on a fast you are acknowledging God. When you are feeling hungry, empty, and weak, you connect with God without all the clutter. In that way fasting is a time vow. It is also a discipline vow. Fasting, especially a longer fast, strengthens your character in every area of your life. - Jentezen Franklin*

Of the five disciplines we will discuss, I perceive that fasting may be one of, if not the most, challenging of them all! If you grew up like me, you love food, too! You love all kinds of food. And you go to certain restaurants or grocery stores because the quality of food is unlike any other. Food is, indeed, a gift from God. He provided it for our replenishment, but not for our diminishment. And whenever food messes up our faith, we've got a problem. Whenever the obsession to satisfy our stomachs becomes greater than the need to satisfy our Savior, we need to fast.

Prior to his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days fasting. Tony Evans defines fasting as, "a deliberate abstinence from any form of gratification to obtain a spiritual goal." I see three benefits to fasting according to the life Jesus modeled on earth. First, fasting clears the mental and spiritual clutter. Secondly, fasting increases our spiritual sensitivity. Thirdly, fasting provides us with a degree of intimacy with God.

### **FASTING CLEARS THE MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL CLUTTER.**

I'm sure you know a few hoarders. Hoarders never throw anything away. They don't call their mess clutter because they always think they have their "organized chaos" under

control. But, if you go into their closet or garage, it's virtually impossible to see what is in the room. You can hurt yourself because there's too much stuff in one space. And when you refuse to clean it, it only gets worse.

When we fast, we clean out the clutter in our mind and heart. Just as cleaning becomes all the more inconvenient and difficult when things pile up, our hearts become harder and harder the longer we prolong the cleansing process. Imagine what your spiritual closet must look like if you have insisted on living a life of discipleship without the discipline to fast. Fasting will not be an easy thing to embrace at first. But when you do it, you will experience undeniable results.

If you're anything like me, it's not until I clean something that I find valuable things that I had been looking for. That's why God wants so desperately for you to embrace fasting. There are precious answers in the spiritual closet, waiting on you to take a time-out from life. God can't give you more until you clear out the unnecessary in your life. Fasting is a commitment to remove the clutter now in order to see the stuff you couldn't see before.



## FASTING INCREASES OUR SPIRITUAL SENSITIVITY.

As the quote by Jentezen Franklin asserts, *“Fasting is not a requirement; it is a choice. It is a vow you choose to make to pursue God on a deeper level.”* For some of us, fasting would be easier to do if God forced us to do it. But the difficult part about this discipline is that you won’t be excommunicated from heaven if you don’t fast. There is no legalistic mandate forcing you to do it—or else. The beauty of this discipline is that it is done on a volunteer basis. All of the disciplines are voluntary acts of surrender, but fasting is unique to our human experience. Prayer, arguably, takes only a few moments of our day but doesn’t inconvenience our tummies. Reading the Word can be done on the treadmill or during a lunch break. Service and worship can happen on a Sunday morning in church, but fasting leaves you longing for and yearning for fulfillment. It’s impossible to fast and not know it. Your stomach will begin to growl. Your body will begin to ache. What’s funny is that, on days when you’re not fasting, you can go hours without eating. But when you determine to get closer to God, every fast-food restaurant comes to mind. Grocery sales increase in abundance when you’re on a fast.

People who don't even know you, invite you to lunch on the week you're fasting. This is the only discipline that leaves you empty in order to make you more sensitive.

Similar to those among us who cannot hear, see, or smell, studies show that other senses become stronger when one sense is inactive. In other words, if I can't see because I have been diagnosed as blind, my hearing will increase exponentially. An amazing strength and sensitivity rises up when another part of us dies. In the same way, when we resist from eating, our flesh may long for fulfillment, but our spiritual being becomes more sensitive to the voice of God. Perhaps this is why Jesus could cast out demons His disciples could not.

*When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. "I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him." And Jesus answered and said, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me." And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately*

*and said, “Why could we not drive it out?” And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. [“But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”] Matthew 17:14-21 (NASB)*

Perhaps the sensitivity Jesus fostered helped him to differentiate a supernatural stronghold from a natural disability. Notice, when Jesus answers the disciples, he doesn't address their commitment. He addresses their faith. The disciples had been loyal. They knew all of the right words to say. They sat under Jesus and had studied him to a science. But they couldn't produce his power without the discipline of fasting. Their salvation was in tact, but their sensitivity was off. When we fast, we become more sensitive to ourselves, to people around us, and most importantly, to God.

## **FASTING PROVIDES US WITH A DEGREE OF INTIMACY WITH GOD**

Fasting provides us with a degree of intimacy with God that is not obtained any other way. This is why fasting and prayer

work hand in hand. Prayer brings us closer to God. Fasting draws us away from ourselves. We fast to detox from the carnal patterns that clutter our focus and ruin our vision. We pray so that our fasting doesn't turn into a horrible form of dieting. Fasting without prayer is voluntary starvation. In order to reap the benefits of this discipline, you've got to create new ways to pray with the end goal being, to get closer to Jesus. Everybody fasts differently, and that is OK. There are different types of fasts (total food fasts, partial food fasts, non-food fasts) and some will fast weekly, monthly or periodically. The key is to exercise this muscle as often as you need to, so that you can ultimately strengthen the weak areas of your inner life. That is and always will be the goal: *to get stronger in God, closer to God, and to become better over time.* The only way to do that is to deny ourselves of what we want temporarily in order to make room for what we need eternally.



## Chapter 6

# THE GREATEST AMONG YOU

*“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” —*  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Once there was a small boy named Gregory. He belonged to a poor family. One day, he was crossing through the forest carrying some woods. He saw an old man who was very hungry. Gregory wanted to give him some food, but he did not have food for himself. So he continued on his way. On his way, he saw a deer who was very thirsty. He wanted to give him some water, but he did not have water for himself. So he went on his way ahead. Then he saw a man who wanted to make a camp but he did not have wood. Gregory asked his problem and gave some wood to him. In return, he gave him some food and water. So he went back to the old man and gave him

some food and gave some water to the deer. The old man and the deer were very happy. Gregory then happily went on his way. However, one day Gregory fell down the hill. He was in pain but he couldn't move and no one was there to help him. But, the old man whom he had helped before saw him. He quickly came and pulled him up the hill. He had many wounds on his legs. The deer whom Gregory had given water saw his wounds and quickly went to the forest and brought some herbs. After some time his wounds were covered. Moral: If you serve others, then others will also serve you. In other words, *the greatest among you will be a servant.*

## **WANT TO BE GREAT? SERVE**

These words out of the mouth of Jesus are words to live by. They are words to die by. They are words that should inspire you to ask yourself: *am I a servant? Do I live to be served or to serve? Am I someone who searches for opportunities to bless others? How often do I serve? Why do I serve? Do I announce my philanthropy when I serve? Do I help others because it's right or because I want recognition?* If we are to live like Christ, then service cannot be seen as an

optional exercise. Service is a regular practice. It is not only something Christians do to “give back to society,” it is the heartbeat and pulse of our call to discipleship.

At Kingdom Church, our mission is to help as many people as possible change their lives for God’s glory and for their good. Our vision is to be a church that lives, loves, and leads like Jesus. The way we accomplish both our mission and our vision is through a concentrated commitment to our four-fold strategy. We are called to seek, shape, serve and send. This is the Great Commission. This is God’s specific assignment to us as a church. We are called to seek and reach the lost, shape and help the found, serve the world locally and globally, and send disciples out to continue the work of ministry. Service is not a tangential or isolated facet of our ministry. It is my conviction that serving should be intricately interwoven into everything that the church does. If we are everything but a servant, then we are nothing at all like the church.

Romans 12:10 says, “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another.” By preferring one another, Paul means to serve with kindness and love. Christian service is not in deeds empty of heart, or



donations devoid of kindness. Service to others is a telltale sign that Jesus lives in us. Service is just as formative as prayer, fasting, scripture reading, and worship, but different than these, service is an outward expression of an inward conviction. All of the other exercises are done within us in order to produce a heart that gives and lives to serve with humility. Jesus modeled what quintessential service looks like, on the very night that he was betrayed:

*After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?"*

*Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this."*

*Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!"*

*Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."*

*Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!"*

*Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean."*

*So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I*

*have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you." —John 13:5–15, nkjv*

The beautiful imagery in this passage is a message in itself. On the last meal Jesus was to partake in with His disciples, He intentionally chose to wash their feet. It's the last deed He did before He was arrested and persecuted. If it is true that what someone does last is most important, then washing the disciples' feet is a clue into how important service was to Jesus. When Peter denied Jesus the privilege of service, he missed the lesson Jesus was trying to teach. The point of Jesus doing what He did was to show the disciples what He was expecting them to do as well. This is why He says, "If I do this for you, then you need to do this for one another."

Jesus never asks us to do what He doesn't do himself. He is not the kind of leader who expects to be served. Instead, He modeled the blessing of servant leadership. When you serve your fellow brother and sister, you discipline yourself to remember the purpose of your salvation. Jesus says in

Mark 20:28, “Just as the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve,” our purpose for being saved is to serve in similar fashion.

## **MAKE OTHERS BETTER**

As a pastor, I often hear tons of testimonies about how serving has impacted people, helping them become more appreciative, more loving, and more patient. However, one particular testimony sticks out to me the most. There was a gentleman from our church who was part of a ministry whose project was to distribute blankets to the homeless. While doing so, he engaged in a conversation with a gentleman who happened to be homeless. That became the catalyst for an epiphany this church member would never forget. He assumed, unfortunately like many people, that this man was homeless because he was uneducated, unmotivated, and unwilling to receive assistance. Another way of putting it was this church member was being a bit judgmental. However, while conversing with this gentleman he discovered that the man possessed multiple graduate degrees but lost his wife and daughter in a tragic car accident, and consequently had some mental health challenges that led to his losing

his employment and residence. The young man from our congregation shared this story with me with tears in his eyes because he was shaken by the fact that he was unknowingly judgmental of this people group until he actually served them. His experience in serving helped him become aware of a blind spot in his life, an area in which he needed to grow. Just like serving helped this young man have that eye-opening and growing experience, so it is a tool God can use to help us do the same.

Practically speaking, how can you serve others to make the world a better place? You can begin by committing to a ministry within your local church. At Kingdom, for example, we believe that we are saved to serve. We are not saved to simply watch others change the world; we are saved so we can influence our sphere to change as well. We change lives so that ultimately we can change the world! That only happens, in a real way, when we commit our gifts to something greater than us. Whether it is serving our adopted orphanage in Haiti, or volunteering to read to seniors in the local nursing home, God is calling you to a life of service. Service breaks the yoke of entitlement. Service disrupts the pattern of ungratefulness. Service heals the wound of

insatiability. Service humbles you and reminds you of where God has brought you from.

After you have prayed, worshiped, read the Bible, and fasted, how will others be blessed by your strength if you never give it away? God receives glory not just by our worship, but also by our commitment to serve others. As his church, we are extensions of his grace. We are His hands and feet. When we show up, help should walk through the door. A listening heart should walk through the door. A connection to destiny should walk through the door. As you map out your spiritual faith regimen this week, include a weekly or monthly commitment to serve others with intention. Don't delay this for another day. Look online now for a local outreach program in which you can take part. Consult your pastor or ministry leader so that your gifts can help change the world. When you do, you will experience a kind of joy that nothing else quite satisfies.

Go on...serve!

## *Chapter 7*

# LIVING A GOD FIRST LIFESTYLE

**E**very great workout has a warm-up and a cool down period. In order to be fully prepared for the exercises you will soon embark upon, you have to stretch your muscles to make sure you don't cause any damage in the end. You stretch first and then you work out. The same is true with faith matters. Whenever I decide to get closer to God, I have to accept that what I do matters and when I do it matters. In the Kingdom of God, order matters. Jesus says, "Seek first the Kingdom and his righteousness" and then he promises that all of the other things will be added. Things come after I seek him and do right. The results from exercising come after I stretch my body and then discipline myself to work out. The order of what I do matters. This is why I felt it was appropriate to end this book with an essential that, I believe God endorses. God desires to be first. Notice in Matthew 6:33 that God did not say, "seek me only." Instead God said, "seek me first." Why? Because

God believes in order. Furthermore, when order is restored, blessings can be released.

Before you jump headfirst into exercising yourself into godliness, and working out your worship, prayer, fasting, and service muscles, I want to encourage you to practice a God First Lifestyle for the next 30 days. If you succeed at 30 days, then add 60 more days. And then, make it a lifestyle practice. By no means is this challenge a legalistic requirement. Rather, I want you to be more intentional about the practices that testify to your priorities and serve as fruit that express the real condition of our hearts. Here is the key to living a God first lifestyle.

***God should receive the first day of every week.***

Sunday is the Lord's Day. It's the day in which we worship him for allowing us to experience another week. We can't expect him to bless the week if we don't give him the first. Some people skip worship to have a great Sunday not realizing that it's better to have half a Sunday and a great week, than to have a whole Sunday and a horrible week. So if you're committing to a God first lifestyle, you are also

committing to worshipping God on the first day of every week in a local assembly (preferably with your spiritual family as often as possible).

***God receives the first minutes of every day.***

Even if we don't engage in lengthy devotions, the first person we should speak to and engage with when we wake up is God. We can't expect him to bless the day if we don't give him the first of it. So if you're committing to a God first lifestyle, that means God gets your first word and your last word. God gets your attention before anything else distracts you. Every day, every morning, God is first.

***God should receive the first of all our increase.***

Tithing seems to be misunderstood as dues to be paid as opposed to an expression of God being first. Tithing doesn't mean God is first, God being first means you tithe. Whenever we experience increase, we should ensure that the first goes to God. This is equally as important as the other two commitments. Whatever you give your greatest gifts to



is often the thing you can't live without. Our commitment to God is more than mere words and activities. Our commitment to God is also seen in our generous giving. This, too, is a sign that we believe that God is first. Everything belongs to God. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. The greatest gift I have is Him, so giving God back a small percentage of the gift he Has freely given me, is my honor and joy.

This is the God-first lifestyle. The first person you think about when you wake up, the first person you think about when you receive income, and the first person you give your free time to, is really an indication of who has first place in your heart. God is emphatically clear! He wants to be first and when he is, our life is blessed. The God first lifestyle is the kingdom life style!

# APPENDIX

The ACTS prayer model will be helpful to you as you learn how to pray. ACTS stands for **Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.**

**Adoration** means worship. Begin your time of prayer by adoring and praising God. Praise Him for who He is and for all that He has done for you. God delights in your praises!

Example: Father God you are a loving, caring, forgiving, compassionate, merciful Shepherd.

**Confession** means agreeing with God about the things you have done wrong (Sin). It's a time to express sorrow about anything that is not pleasing to Him. Ask God to forgive you, and then believe that He does so freely. When you confess your sins, you receive God's cleansing.

Example: Father, forgive me for not having the faith to trust you; this has led to me worrying.

**Thanksgiving** means being thankful to God. Thank Him for His love, protection, and provision (just to name a few things).

Example: Father, thank you for your peace, your love, and your protection.

**Supplication** means praying for your needs and for the needs of others, such as friends, family, your pastor, missionaries, government leaders, and persecuted Christians around the world. You may also want to pray for such things as God's guidance, wisdom, and opportunities to serve.

Example: Father, give me a double portion of your wisdom to use on the job, raising my children, and speaking to my spouse. I pray for Pastor Daniels. Cover and protect Him, his family and our Kingdom family.

*The ACTS prayer model serves as a guide to help you, not a rigid formula to follow. Just talk from your heart. Set aside a specific time to pray each day. Pick a quiet place where you can be alone with God. Begin your time by reading the Bible.*

*Spend some time thinking about it deeply. Reflect on what God is impressing on your heart to you through the passage. Ask God to help you apply what you are learning.*

## **BIBLE READING PLAN**

### **Books in the Bible**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Old Testament</b> – Consists of 39 books:<br><b>5 Books of Law</b><br><b>12 Books of History</b><br><b>5 Books of Wisdom and Poetry</b><br><b>17 Books on Prophecy</b> | <b>New Testament</b> – Consists of 27 books.<br><b>4 Gospels</b><br><b>1 History</b><br><b>14 Pauline Epistles</b><br><b>7 General Epistles</b><br><b>1 Prophetic</b> |
|---|---|

### **Who Wrote the Bible?**

Over a span of 1,500 years, God used over 40 different men and inspired them to record His divine revelation. The entire Bible is “God breathed” or divinely inspired (*2 Timothy 3:16*).

### **Why Read it?**

We must read the Bible because the Word of God is the spiritual food by which the believer should live.

## **How Do I Read It?**

**Select an understandable translation.** Different versions of the Bible are simply different translations of the Bible

**Find a place to start.** This can be very difficult and confusing if it is your first time. The Gospels and Wisdom literature are always a good place to start.

**Set a consistent time and place.** It is important that you consistently make time and space to read and study the scriptures. Joshua 1:8

**Set a sustainable pace.** You should set a daily reading regiment that you can sustain over time.

*This Bible Reading Plan will assist you with integrating the discipline of scripture reading into your daily life.*

| DAY | THEME   | PASSAGE                            |
|-----|---|------------------------------------|
| 1   | Jesus is predicted                                | Isaiah 53                          |
| 2   | The birth of Jesus                                | Matthew 1:18-25                    |
| 3   | John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus       | Matthew 3:1-4:11                   |
| 4   | Jesus' first miracle and the Samaritan woman      | John 2:1-11; John 4:1-26           |
| 5   | Jesus is rejected in His own hometown             | Luke 4:14-30                       |
| 6   | Jesus calls His disciples                         | Luke 5:1-11; Matthew 9:9-13        |
| 7   | The Sermon on the Mount                           | Luke 6:17-46                       |
| 8   | The Centurion, the widow's son and a sinful woman | Matt 8:1-13; Luke 7:11-17; 7:36-50 |
| 9   | Jesus encounters the Pharisees                    | Matthew 12:1-13, 22-45             |
| 10  | Parable of the sower, weeds, and seeds            | Matthew 13:1-43                    |
| 11  | Jesus calms a storm and walks on water            | Luke 8:22-25; Mark 6:45-56         |
| 12  | Jesus heals a man, a woman, and a girl            | Mark 5:1-43                        |
| 13  | Jesus feeds the 5,000                             | John 6:1-14                        |
| 14  | Peter's confession & the Transfiguration          | Luke 9:18-27; Luke 17:1-8          |
| 15  | Healing by faith                                  | Mark 9:14-32                       |
| 16  | Teachings and parables                            | Matthew 17:24-18:20                |
| 17  | More teachings and parables                       | Matthew 18:21-19:15                |

|           |                                       |                                 |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>18</b> | The rich, young ruler                 | Mark 10:17-31                   |
| <b>19</b> | The disciples sent out                | Luke 10:1-24                    |
| <b>20</b> | The Great Commandment                 | Mark 12:28-44                   |
| <b>21</b> | The parable of the good Samaritan     | Luke 10:25-37                   |
| <b>22</b> | Jesus teaches us how to pray          | Luke 11:1-13                    |
| <b>23</b> | Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead    | John 11:1-44                    |
| <b>24</b> | The triumphal entry into Jerusalem    | Matthew 21:1-27                 |
| <b>25</b> | The Last Supper                       | John 13:1-17; Matt 26:17-35     |
| <b>26</b> | Jesus' love for His disciples         | John 14-15                      |
| <b>27</b> | Jesus arrested and betrayed           | Matthew 26:36-75                |
| <b>28</b> | Jesus' unfair trial                   | John 18:19-19:16                |
| <b>29</b> | Jesus' crucifixion and death          | John 19:17-42                   |
| <b>30</b> | Jesus' resurrection and appearances   | John 20-21                      |
| <b>31</b> | Great commission and Jesus' ascension | Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:50-53 |



## WORSHIP SONGS FOR PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EXPERIENCES

*Feel Free to Add These Songs/Arists To Your Worship Library*

### **The LOVE OF GOD**

*One Thing Remains* by

Jesus Culture

*How He Loves Us* by

Anthony Evans

*Love You With the Truth*

by Casting Crowns

*Your Love is Extravagant*

by Casting Crowns

*The Truth* by Casey J.

*Good Good Father* by

Housefires

*I am* by Jason Nelson

*I am* by Eddie James

### **The GRACE OF GOD**

*If Not For Your Grace* by

Israel Houghton

*Amazing Grace* by Chris

Tomlin

*Grace* by Tasha Cobbs

*Worship Medley* by Kurt

Carr

*Speak to Me* by Mary Mary

*Order My Steps* by

Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir

*I Am What You See* by Paul

Morton

*Jesus Reigns* by Youthful

Praise

### **The FAITHFULNESS OF GOD**

*I Surrender* by Hillsong

*Withholding Nothing* by

William McDowell

*Nobody Like You Lord* by

Maranda Willis

*Nothing Without You* by

Jason Nelson

*I Give You My Heart* by

Hillsong

*Trust Me* by Richard

Smallwood

*Days of Elijah* by Charles

Jenkins

*Hallelujah You're Worthy* by  
Judith McAllister

## **The HOLINESS OF GOD**

*One Thing* by Housefires

*Let Praises Rise* by ORU

Worship Center

*Give Me You* by Shana

Wilson

*Our Prayer* by Yolanda

Adams

*Holy is Our God* by James

Fortune

*You are My Strength* by

William Murphy

*Release Your Power* by TD

Jakes

*Yahweh (All the Glory*

*Belongs to You)* by Mali

Music

## **SURRENDERING to GOD**

*Cornerstone* by Hillsong

Live

*All Because of Jesus* by

Casting Crowns

*More and More* by Israel

and New Breed

*Holy* by Tiff Joy

*Jesus at the Center* by Israel

Houghton

*I Love You Forever* by Tye

Tribbett

*Yes* by Shekinah Glory

*Only You are Holy* by

Donnie McClurkin

## **The FORGIVENESS of GOD**

*Jesus Friend of Sinners* by

Casting Crowns

*Intentional* by Travis Greene

*Available to You* by Melinda

Watts

*Called to Be* By Jonathan

Nelson

*Mercy Said No* by Cece

Winans

*A Heart that Forgives* by

Kevin LeVar

*Your Love is Extravagant* by

Casting Crowns

*Forgive Me Lord* by J. Moss

## **The HOLY SPIRIT**

*I believe* by Micah Stampley

*Holy Spirit* by Jesus Culture

*Indescribable* by Chris

Tomlin

*He's Able* by Darwin Hobbs

*Fill Me Up* by Tasha Cobbs

*Water* by Anthony Brown

*Rain on Us* by Earnest Pugh

*Hallelujah (The Anthem)* by

Planetshakers