

IN HIS PRESENCE

Spending Time with God



Dennis Fisher



introduction

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How is your prayer life?" the well-meaning father asked his son. The bright, church-going 14-year-old shrugged his shoulders, "I don't really pray that much."

"Why not?" the concerned father pressed.

"I don't really need anything."

That honest teenager put words to what many

of us are afraid to admit out loud—we don't pray unless we need something.

In the following pages, staff writer Dennis Fisher takes a look at our common struggle to make time for God. Along the way, he gives us some practical pointers that will help us as we strive to pray, read God's Word, and serve others in the process.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

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one

The Problem

Right after the creation of the first man and woman, the Bible tells us that God was “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (GENESIS 3:8). The Creator of the universe did not hide from His creatures behind closed doors or angelic assistants. Instead, He sought out Adam and Eve for spiritual companionship.

The same fellowship-seeking God who walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day is reaching out to each of us today.

This is what a quiet time is all about—spending time with God to experience His presence, comfort, and guidance.

Many of us wish to have a meaningful quiet time with

God, yet we find ourselves in an environment where that is difficult. This may lead to a sense of guilt if we neglect our personal devotional time with God. But if we measure our spirituality by counting the number of times we have met with God during the week, we have missed the point. Devotions are a matter of our heart, not just an appointment on our calendar.

↷ A **quiet time** is a special time set aside for conversation with God. This often includes prayer, Scripture reading, and meditation. It is often daily and done at a specific time.



As a sophomore in college, I had a discipline problem. All kinds of activities and distractions competed with getting assignments in on time and preparing for exams. The busyness of life constantly caused me to replace one activity with another or to neglect some things entirely. Not only did I not seem to get things done, I was having a hard time making a plan for getting things done.

One night after class, I discussed my problem with a professor. He recommended that I prioritize my daily schedule. As I considered his advice, I felt compelled to single out time with God as the top priority of each day. That would be the one "to do" that always got done, regardless of whatever else might fill my day. Planning it for the first thing in the morning would help ensure I got it done.

But the next day, as I began my new commitment, my resolve sagged. Time with God seemed like too much effort for not enough reward. I simply wasn't in the mood.

I admitted my feelings to the Lord. I told Him my heart was cold and I felt little motivation to spend time with Him. I confessed my apathy and thanked Him for His forgiveness.

Then I chose to give my mood to God. I asked Him to replace my stagnation and apathy with His vitality. Rereading my devotional passage for the day, I prayed for real transformation. As I began to pray over the projects that needed my attention later in the day, I told God about my assignments and asked Him for the strength necessary to do my best with them.

By the time my feet hit the asphalt on the way to class, I had begun to feel an energy, a focus, and—most important—a discipline I had previously lacked. That semester my grades went up. God had answered my prayer. As I continued to ask God to solidify my new commitment to spend time with Him, I found the strength I needed.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength" (ISAIAH 40:31 NKJV). The prophet's



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promise to the people of ancient Israel still holds true for us today. The Hebrew word for *renew* means “to substitute, to exchange, to show newness, to sprout.” But the kind of waiting that renews strength is active, not passive. It is a deliberate exchange of human effort for divine strength. We are not expected to dig deep and tap into an unknown reserve of our own willpower and determination. Instead we are to ask God to give us His energy—we ask Him to supply our strength.

Our Model

As we seek to spend time with God, who better to look at as our example than Jesus? During His life on earth, Jesus limited the exercise of His divine powers. Although fully God, He depended on the Father and the indwelling Spirit working through Him. That dependence was demonstrated by the way Jesus sought time alone with His Father. The Gospels record multiple times⁸ when Jesus left the crowds and His followers behind for solitary communion with the Father.

↪ **Times when Jesus retreated to pray:** *Matthew 26:36ff; Mark 1:35; 6:46; 14:32-39; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 11:1; 22:41ff; John 18:1.*

Mark 1:32–39 records one such occurrence. A closer look at the text shows the importance and impact of our Lord’s own devotional life and what we can learn from it. “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" (1:35).

After a long evening of healing sick and demon-possessed people (1:29–34), Jesus actively made time to commune with God. I believe Christ used this time to regain His spiritual center.

Our Distractions and God's Directions

"Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come'" (1:36-38).

The word *found* in verse 37 could be translated "hunted down." Thinking they knew best how Jesus should spend His day, Peter and his friends sought Him out. They were willing to interrupt the Lord's prayer time with their own urgent concerns: "Everyone is looking for you!"

But Jesus didn't worry about being perceived as unresponsive or uncaring. Did His quiet time make Him less sensitive to the people near Him? Just the opposite. It seems that as a result of His time alone with the



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Father, Jesus desired to continue with His larger mission: "to seek and to save what was lost" (LUKE 19:10). Meeting only the needs of those directly in front of Him would have been to ignore God's concern for all who are lost. Jesus' resolve was solidified after His time with the Father. 📖

📖 **One such time** was during Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His crucifixion. "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." (MATT. 26:42)

Jesus used His time alone with God for meaningful fellowship as well as for strength and direction to carry on with His mission. If we desire the same results from our time alone with God, we need to follow Jesus' example and apply God's Word in the power of the Spirit, letting it influence not just what we do but to change the very people we are.

If time alone with God is seen as a once-a-day spiritual oasis or as merely something to be checked off our "to do" list, we may fall into the trap of separating our spiritual life from the rest of our life. That's a subtle mistake we need to avoid. Time with God is our spiritual lifeline. From the Garden of Eden until now, God has desired to walk with His people in every part of life's journey.



two

The Preparation

P **people who love each other** are intentional about spending meaningful time together. To do this, discipline and love must work together. Finding time requires deliberate planning.

A similar intentionality is necessary to cultivate meaningful time with God. We see this deliberate relational approach modeled by Jesus: He set aside time alone and allowed that time to impact Him. Often we begin the day intent on having devotions at a set time, but as the day goes on, one item after another bombards

and distracts us until devotions are postponed or forgotten until the next day.

But when we center ourselves in God, things fall into proper perspective and a quiet time becomes a priority rather than something that we squeeze into our leftover time.

This relational connection requires discipline.

In 1 Corinthians 9, the apostle Paul used the imagery of athletic games¹ to illustrate the need for spiritual discipline. The term translated "strict training" (v. 25) literally means "the power of self-control; to practice abstinence."



When we center ourselves in God, things fall into proper perspective.

¹ *"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 CORINTHIANS 9:26-27).*

When athletes commit to the Olympics, they avoid anything that might distract them. Disciplined exercise and rigorous diet are essential. Similarly, by setting up a daily devotional discipline and, through God's strength, making it a priority, the results can amaze us.

Here are some ways to set up a quiet time:

Set realistic expectations. I knew a student who was an excellent writer. The problem was that he consistently turned in his papers late. "If I can't do it right, I won't do it!" he declared. His commitment to perfectionism caused him to do things that actually damaged his grade rather than improve it.

Many of us have a similar approach to maintaining a quiet time. We often decide to "throw the baby out with the bathwater." If we cannot do it exactly the way we want, we don't do it at all.

➤ **Perfectionism** and the tyranny of the urgent can be enemies of our quiet time with God. Some time with God is better than no time with God.

But devotional time with God is not about perfection, it is about progress. It is better to have a short and deliberate time than to skip it entirely in the name of high standards. Perfect circumstances rarely occur, and if we wait to have devotions until they do, we may never have them. ▶

Find the right place. C. S. Lewis, in his book *Letters to Malcom*, has a surprising suggestion regarding devotional times. His advice is to make sure there is "just the right amount of distraction" to help us



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concentrate. Lewis tells of a man who had his devotional time in a railroad compartment because complete silence left too much temptation for his mind to wander. The sounds of the railcar forced him to concentrate. His focus was enhanced when it was slightly challenged.

The point is that we're not always going to find a place that is as quiet as an undiscovered cave. We need to find the place that best fits our needs and enhances our quiet time.

Reserve a daily time. Many people emphasize the importance of starting the day with devotions. I once heard someone say that the code for his own devotional life was, "No Bible, no breakfast." This commitment may have worked for him, but depending on your metabolism, occupation, or lifestyle, devotions may be better for you at midday or even late at night. Everyone is different.

The Bible encourages meeting with God at any time of the day. David wrote, "O God, You are my God; early will I seek You" (PSALM 63:1 NKJV). He also mentioned his anticipation to meditate on God's Word during the "watches of the night" (PSALM 119:148). Daniel prayed at three set times a day (DANIEL 6:10). And the first psalm refers to the blessed man whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night" (1:2).

↗ Many Christian traditions practice **fixed hour prayers**—morning, mid-day, and evening praying is a way to grow in and discipline your prayer life.

There is wonderful freedom about meeting times with God. It is up to us to decide what time of day is best suited for us to meet with Him. What matters is the commitment to having a daily time when God can speak with you through His Word and you can respond to Him in prayer.

Whether we need a highly disciplined schedule or prefer a more relaxed one, we all need a plan. Use a wall calendar, smart phone, daily planner, computer, or any other type of calendar to mark the daily time set aside to meet with God.



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It's better to be brief and consistent. A music instructor said, "It's better to practice 15 minutes a day every day than to practice several hours just two days a week."

This principle easily applies to our devotional time. It is better to block out just 15 minutes and to consistently keep that time than to let our daily discipline be eaten away by multiple distractions and then try to make up with one or two long sessions with God. Manageable devotional times, even if they

are brief, get us in the practice and may lead to more consistent and longer times. After prayerfully deciding how much time to spend, write it on your calendar.



three

The Practice

Discipline is not the only thing necessary in our devotional times. Relationships are built through communication, and two-way communication is better communication.

God speaks to us. In time past, God spoke directly to His people. In 1 Samuel 3:21, we read that God “revealed himself to Samuel through his word.”

The Hebrew word for *reveal* means “to show or uncover.” The Creator disclosed His thoughts, character, and will to His servant. Today, God’s communication

comes mainly through the Bible, and the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds as we read it.

In approaching a portion of Scripture, the following time-honored process, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, can help make examining the Word of God fruitful.

First we ask: **“What does the passage say?”** We answer this by looking at the message of the passage in its original context. Allow the Bible passage to speak for itself in its original historical and cultural setting.

Secondly we ask: **“What does it mean?”** Meaning is not limited to the original audience. Within the Bible passage is a core spiritual truth that is meaningful in all ages. We should strive to discover the message a passage has for us today.

Finally we ask: **“How does it apply?”** The Holy Spirit can change our thoughts, speech, and behavior when we allow Him to use the principle we find in God’s Word to shape us. Another way to phrase this question is, “In what ways should my life change as a result of studying this passage?”¹

↗ *The ancient practice of **Lectio Divina** (Latin for divine reading) might be a way to help with reading and understanding the Bible. **Lectio Divina** is the slow, contemplative praying of Scripture as a means of hearing God’s voice through the pages of His Word.*

We respond to God. Have you ever written a letter in which you opened the depths of your heart? How would you feel if you received a response to that letter that ignored everything you wrote and talked only about issues that concerned the other person?

The Bible is a love letter from our heavenly Father. It is the story of the depth of His love for us. Yet often our communication with God is one-sided; we read His message to us and respond with prayers that are about us. Instead of responding to the love letter, we ignore its content and focus solely on our own pressing needs.

As we pray, we are free to tell God all of the things that concern us. But remember, you have just heard from Him through His Word about what concerns Him. Take the time to respond to what you have read. Thank Him for His promises. Rejoice in the instruction we have received. Confess where the Holy Spirit is convicting. Revel in the insight into His character. Ask Him for deeper, clearer understanding of what a passage means and what it means as we strive to be transformed more like Christ.



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Daniel 6:10 says of Daniel: "Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God." As Daniel made his requests known to God, a spirit of thanksgiving permeated his prayer time, despite his difficult circumstances. Our prayers should be marked by a similar sound of thanksgiving for who God is and what He has done for us.

Writing it down. Keeping a written record of what we discover in our quiet time will reveal trends in our journey of faith. We will see progress in different areas of our life that may go unnoticed were they not written down.

The guide given below could be copied in a notebook and kept as a record of daily quiet times.

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Date: _____

Passage: _____

Insights: _____

Application: _____

Prayer: _____



*Jesus functioned
on Earth as all
humans are
meant to function
—in total
dependence on
the Father.*

The practice of writing things down helps us remember what we have learned and keeps it fresh in our mind so that we can continue to be impacted by it for the rest of the day.

Jesus was perfect, yet He looked for undistracted time with God. Why? Because He functioned on Earth as all humans are meant to function—in total dependence on the Father. His life on Earth was spent in perfect submission to His Father. We gained insights from Jesus' own "quiet time" in the previous pages.

We can also learn from Jesus how to allow our times with God to impact us throughout our day.



four

The Payoff

Have you ever felt that your quiet time didn't do you much good as you went out to face the day? That the time and effort you put into spending time in God's Word and in prayer had no impact on your problems? That your devotional time didn't really have any importance for the rest of your day, as though the two really had nothing to do with each other? This is called compartmentalization—confining your spiritual life to an exclusive part of the day. But God never intended for us to live this way. He is eager to walk with us, [▶] helping us through life's struggles.

✎ *“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (DEUTERONOMY 31:6)*

Jesus’ encounter with the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, recorded in Luke 24:13-32, contains insights for us about conversing with God throughout the day.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him (LUKE 24:13–16).

Little is known outside of this account about the two who walked the path from Jerusalem to Emmaus, but the Bible indicates that they were troubled. They had an internal conflict—an emotional struggle over a disappointing experience—and they were discussing it.

It was in the middle of their sorrow and confusion that Jesus approached them as they walked. “Jesus himself came up and walked along with them” (v. 15). How wonderful! The risen Christ joined them on their journey. He wants to join us as well. Life is a journey and Christ wants to be our constant companion as we walk our own dusty

trails. He desires more from us than a conversation at the occasional rest stop.

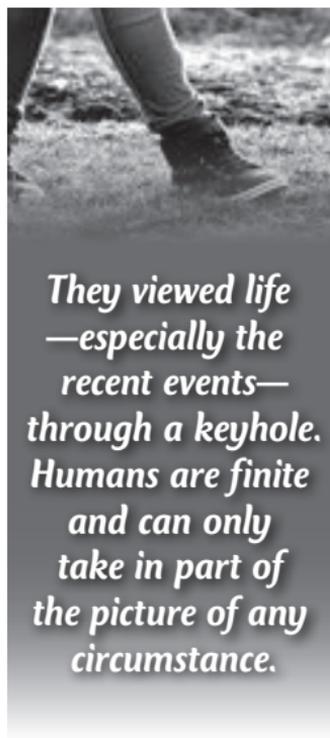
Acknowledge the road bumps. One of life's greatest challenges is trying to make sense of the apparent contradictions and setbacks we face. Much of our confusion comes from the fact that we are limited in our perspective; we only have part of the picture. The two people on the road to Emmaus were caught in the middle of this very problem. Not only did they not understand many of the things that had happened, but also the events that had unfolded were contrary to what they had expected. Jesus saw their struggle and helped them address it.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God



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and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see" (vv. 17–24).



They viewed life—especially the recent events—through a keyhole. Humans are finite and can only take in part of the picture of any circumstance.

Responding to Christ's question, the two detailed what was troubling them. Their summary was a concise review of the hope they held that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah who would redeem the nation of Israel. Instead, He had been crucified. Their hopes and the hopes of many others died with Him on the cross. As if their minds were not already reeling, they had heard reports that His tomb was now empty, and several of their friends had received visits and heard messages from angels.

↪ *Our inability to completely understand our infinite God should never keep us from seeking Him. While we will never know all there is to know about God we can know Him and He longs for relationship with us.*

The two, who had walked with the Lord only days before, had soaring hopes. Now, their dreams were shattered. They viewed life—and especially the recent events—through a keyhole. That is what it means to be human. Humans are finite and can only take in part of the picture of any circumstance. ▶

These two took what they thought they knew and measured it against what they had experienced, and things didn't add up. Our experience is just like theirs.

Often what we believe doesn't make sense from our limited perspective. Whether it's our disappointed expectations of how God should answer a prayer, or how we view life's apparent misfortunes, we must remember that we are limited in our understanding.

But Jesus wants us to tell Him our concerns. He is ready to provide a listening ear as we tell Him about all the details, great



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and small, of our lives. The believer's unique relationship with Christ allows prayerful communication in the middle of any circumstance.

Let Jesus explain. It must have been devastating for Jesus' followers to have their hopes and dreams crushed with such seeming finality. But when Christ used the light of the Scriptures to illuminate their experience, they began to get a fresh outlook on their circumstances.

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (vv. 25–27).

Jesus' response sounds abrupt: "How foolish you are!" The original Greek wording translated "foolish"²⁸ literally meant "without knowledge." The two disciples on the road didn't know the full story.

↗ *The Greek word translated "**foolish**" in verse 25 is used by Paul in Galatians 3 verses 1 and 3. There, Paul connects their foolishness both to knowledge and to activity. Foolishness can be the result of not knowing, but it can also be the result of not acting on what we know.*

Jesus provided the only solution to the problem—additional information. The Teacher explained to them, from key passages in the Scriptures, why the events of the last few days should not have been surprising. He enlightened them about how the Messiah must suffer before being glorified.



Remaining teachable and being in regular contact with our Teacher gives our faith and knowledge opportunity to grow.

The lesson for us is that though we struggle with disappointment, we too lack the knowledge that puts everything in perspective and allows us to understand. The Lord may eventually provide the necessary information to help us make sense of our circumstances. But sometimes we won't get an answer before the coming of Christ in His eternal kingdom. Remaining teachable, sometimes despite our circumstances, and being in regular contact with our Teacher gives our faith and knowledge opportunity to grow.

Await divine activity. Meaningful connection with the risen Christ makes us want to linger with Him. When the two on the road reached their destination, they felt a strong need to stay close to the Savior.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But

they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them (vv. 28–29).

The disciples had heard what this stranger had to say for several miles, but they wanted to hear more. “Stay with us,” they insisted.

He joined the two for their evening meal, and the presence of the divine opened the possibility for the supernatural. Including the Lord in the routine affairs of our daily life opens the door for His work in every area of life. 🐦

🐦 *God’s concern for the affairs of our “daily life” is evident in how Jesus instructed His disciples to pray. When asked how to pray, He responded by telling them to pray not only for the things of heaven, but about common, everyday issues such as food and forgiveness (MATTHEW. 6:8-15; LUKE 11:1-4).*

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (vv. 30–32).

After Jesus shared and blessed the bread, the disciples’ eyes were opened and they recognized Him. Earlier, “they were kept from recognizing him” (v. 16). But now

they saw the stranger's true identity.

Likely in shock at the sudden revelation and subsequent disappearance of the Lord, the two reflected on what it was like to be walking with Jesus and having Him teach them the Scriptures. Their hearts burned as the Scriptures were explained with divine insight and authority. The same Greek word used for their eyes were "opened" (v. 31) is used to explain how Jesus "opened" the Scriptures to them (v. 32). He penetrated their minds with understanding.

Recognizing Christ in the Scriptures and in our experiences should occur throughout the day rather than being limited to a once-a-day event.



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Building a relationship isn't easy. It requires diligence, discipline, communication, patience, trust, and time. A relationship with God is no exception. The preceding pages were written to give hope, inspiration, and a plan for moving forward with God. Spend time with Him in His Word and in prayer. Take your conversation with

Him into every part of your daily life. Allow Him to speak to you and take time, often, to speak with Him. As you do, your life with God will develop and deepen; and, as it does, you will find that the results are well worth the effort. 🌱



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