



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

SUGGESTIONS FOR SPENDING DAILY TIME WITH GOD

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“This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

—John 17:3 ESV



God desires an intimate, personal relationship with His children and calls us to know, love, and serve Him and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. As we do so, we will experience joy and delight. God tells us that our relationship with Him will grow and flourish as we intentionally seek after and pursue Him, and He has given us specific means by which to do so. This

means we can grow much closer to God as we deepen our desire and longing for Him.

In God’s design, the primary way for us to pursue Him is by active engagement in a congregation of His people. This means following the example of believers in the early church, who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42¹). There is no substitute for regularly gathering to worship God and sing His praises, listening attentively to the preaching of His word, praying, and celebrating communion.

Three of these corporate practices also have a private, personal dimension that we experience by setting aside time each day to quietly read and reflect on God’s Word, lift our prayers to Him, and give thanks and praise to Him for who He is and for His goodness to us. Often referred to as Quiet Time or Daily Devotions, this



Reading aloud, which has been the practice of God's people until recent times, will enhance your reading and is well worth the effort.



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practice has a long history among God's people and can be seen in the Psalms (5:3; 119:147), many of which were written around 1000 B.C. It has been a common practice of those who have been close to God over the centuries and who have known Him most intimately.

Below are some helpful suggestions that will aid you in developing your own daily time with God and growing to know Him better and love Him more.

1. Set a specific time and place to meet with God each day. Most people choose a morning slot, because they are then alert and can start the day with God before the busyness begins. If that works for you, well and good. But the morning doesn't work for everyone. God made both larks and owls, so learn your circadian rhythm and cooperate with it. Choose the time that works best for you. Then choose a place that is familiar, quiet, comfortable, free of distractions, and available regularly.
2. Make your daily time with God a top priority. This is one way of putting God first in your life. He is a loving Father and wants to spend time with you and help you. Is there anything more important in your life than meeting with God? This will require commitment, discipline, and planning. An important aspect of this is to ensure that you get adequate sleep so you can be alert when you meet with the Lord. Research has shown that most people need an average of about eight hours of sleep a night; trying to operate on significantly less has negative physical and mental impacts and is not sustainable.
3. For how long should we aim to pray and read His Word? Although there are no biblical directions about this, a reasonable place to start might be thirty minutes a day, half spent reading Scripture and half in actual prayer. Once that becomes an established pattern, increasing to one hour a day would be a good goal. This should grow out of an increasing desire for God.



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4. What is the best approach to Bible reading and prayer? Many people have found it helpful to begin by reading the Bible. Why? Because Scripture teaches us truth about God, His works, His ways, ourselves, and the world and thus can prepare our hearts and minds for fellowship with Him and for prayer. When our hearts are prepared this way, we will find that God sometimes highlights a truth to us in a way that brings special blessing and prompts us to offer specific prayers and praise.

Before starting to read, however, it is important to have a clean heart, that is, to confess any sins of which we are aware and ask God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9). At this time it is also important to ask God to illuminate our minds by the Holy Spirit so that we might rightly understand His Word and how it applies to our lives (Ps. 119:17–19). When reading the Bible, slow is better than fast. If we rush through our reading, we will miss the benefit. Take time to ponder and reflect, pausing to pray or praise or give thanks where appropriate. Reading aloud, which has been the practice of God's people until recent times, will enhance your reading and is well worth the effort. (*Understanding the Bible* by John Stott has helped many gain a better understanding of the Scriptures.)

5. Where should we read? Some people read the Bible straight through from start to finish, at a comfortable pace. This has the value of showing the big picture of Scripture, which is important to see. Others focus on areas that address a present need or interest, maybe the Gospels or Epistles, or the Pentateuch or the Psalms. Still others take a less structured approach. Each has its place, depending on one's age, maturity, and present needs. Many Bible reading plans are available; find one that seems right for you and get started. Whichever plan you choose, do not tie yourself down to completing it in one year unless you have ample time for reading each day. Otherwise, you can feel pressured to read too fast, to complete the daily portion. Hasty reading can lead to a legalistic, dry exercise of self-discipline that has little spiritual benefit.

Whatever approach you take,
always begin by asking the Holy
Spirit to lead you in prayer.





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6. Closely related to Bible reading is the much-neglected practice of Bible meditation (Josh. 1:8; Pss. 1:1–3; 119:15–16; 145:5; Phil. 4:8). Reading the Bible without meditating on it can increase your knowledge but leave you with a shallow faith. Scripture places a strong emphasis on meditation, which is the prayerful, slow reading aloud and pondering of selected Bible verses, passages, or stories. It is chiefly through this practice that we gain deeper understanding and experience transformation. (*Meditating on the Word* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer has helped many people learn how to meditate better.)

7. Application of what we learn is essential for growth. We should approach God’s Word with the settled intention of obeying whatever we discover to be His will. Failure to obey God hardens our hearts and leads us into self-deception (James 1:22–25). The following questions have been helpful to many people as they discern how to respond to what they read: What does it show me about God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? What does it teach me about myself? What does it teach me about life in this world? What response does it require of me? Be sure to have a notepad or journal and a pen handy to jot down any special insights (and any “to-do” items that come to mind, so they don’t distract you).

8. Get a Bible that you can understand and that is translated by scholars who believe in the full trustworthiness of the Scriptures. It is helpful to have one Bible that takes a more literal approach to translating the Scriptures (ESV, NASB) and another that takes a more dynamic-equivalent approach (NIV). Comparing the two might clarify the meaning of passages that are unclear to you. Also, you can find answers to many questions in the notes included in study Bibles such as the ESV Study Bible and the NIV Study Bible.

9. What approach should I use in prayer? Many people pray about whatever comes to mind at the time, perhaps prompted



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by what they have just read or other concerns. This is certainly good. However, we should learn a lesson from Jesus's disciples, who asked Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). In response, Jesus gave them a short version of what we call the Lord's Prayer. The fuller and preferable version is found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:9–13). Ask Jesus to teach you to pray and use this approach; it will put you into the Jesus School of Prayer. Learning to pray this prayer, which is a framework or pattern for prayer, has been a great blessing to God's people over the centuries. Many find the structure helpful. As we come to understand what is entailed in each of the six far-reaching petitions, our prayer lives will be strengthened, enriched, and enlarged. (*A Layman Looks at the Lord's Prayer* by Phillip Keller has been a very helpful book for thousands of people over the years and still is.) Another helpful and simple approach to pray the Scriptures; that is, turn specific verses into a prayer back to God. Many passages in the Bible are well suited to this, especially in the Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles. (*Praying the Bible* by Donald Whitney is helpful here.) Whatever approach you take, always begin by asking the Holy Spirit to lead you in prayer.

10. Some people find it helpful to record in a journal insights gained from their Bible reading and meditation. This practice has a long history and has proven beneficial for some, though others have not been drawn to it. It can help crystalize and clarify your thoughts. If done on a regular basis, it can also provide a record of milestones in your spiritual life — that can enable you to see the pattern of God's dealings with you in the past. Related to this is keeping a prayer list. This can help you remember specific prayer concerns and also build your faith as you see answers. However, be careful not to let it become a checklist that you mechanically recite.

11. Note that anything we do repeatedly can become routine and

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boring. If you notice that this is happening to your Bible reading and prayer, confess the pattern to God and ask Him to help you. Ask Him to show you what is wrong and to restore hunger and thirst for Him and provide refreshment. Also remember that sin will interrupt our fellowship with God and cause devotional times to become empty and hollow. God will not be mocked. Do you have any unconfessed sin? Broken relationships? Other hindrances? Pray Psalm 139:23–24, asking God to search you and show you what is amiss. Of course, sometimes God seems distant, and we cannot find any reason except that He has chosen to be silent with us for a time. In such a case, ask Him to help you learn any lessons He is trying to teach you through His silence.

12. Because we are not yet perfected, there is always the possibility of drifting into a spiritually deadening, joyless legalism in our devotional lives. This is not an uncommon problem for believers. Remind yourself from time to time that prayer and Bible reading are not an end in themselves but a means to an end. They are all about a relationship of love and intimacy with the Father and Jesus Christ — getting to know and love God more and more. Out of this love comes a desire to please the Father and Son through obedience and good works. But always remember that our love for God and our good works cannot earn God’s acceptance, because there is nothing we can do to increase or decrease His love for us. As C.S. Lewis said, “He loves us not because we are lovable, but because He is love.” And He has made us acceptable to Himself through the atoning work of Jesus. God saves us by His grace alone, through faith in Jesus and His finished work on the cross alone, and He blesses us throughout our lives by that same grace. ■

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version. Any italics are mine.



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Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it God shows Himself to us. That He answers prayers is a corollary — not necessarily the most important one — from that revelation. What He does is learned from what He is.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

In his article, Tom Tarrants offers 12 suggestions that will aid you in developing your own daily time with God and growing to know Him better and love Him more. After reflecting on your daily time with the Lord over the past month, which two or three of these suggestions would be most helpful to you at this time in drawing closer to God? What steps would you like to take to implement them?



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2

Tom Tarrants identifies four books that others have found helpful in this area: *Understanding the Bible* by John Stott, *Meditating on the Word* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Layman Looks at the Lord's Prayer* by Phillip Keller, and *Praying the Bible* by Donald Whitney. Would you like to read one of these books in the next month or two, and if so, how and when will you obtain the book?



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Tom Tarrants has lived in the Washington, DC area since 1978 and served as President of the C.S. Lewis Institute from 1998 to April 2010. He is currently Vice President for Ministry & Director, Washington Area Fellows Program. Prior to coming to the Institute, he served as co-pastor of Christ Our Shepherd Church in Washington, DC. Tom holds a Master of Divinity Degree, as well as a Doctor of Ministry Degree in Christian Spirituality.

He is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Church Alliance and a member of the Evangelical Theological Society.

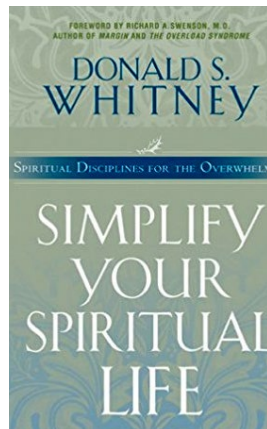


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RECOMMENDED READING



Donald S. Whitney, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life: Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed* (NavPress, 2003)

Jesus faced incredible challenges and suffered agonizing trials, but there was simplicity in His relationship with His Father that we can emulate. And in that simplicity, we can realize our greatest fulfillment as believers. If your Bible study seems tedious and your prayer life wearisome, stop and rediscover how rewarding the simple Christian life can be.