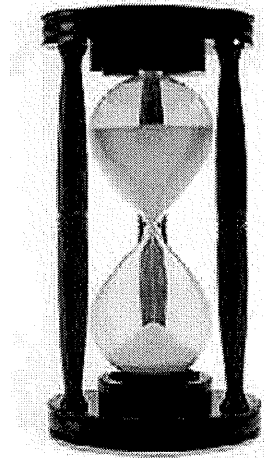


A Day To Pray

A simple plan for enjoying extended time with God

By Lonni Collins Pratt



There's no telling what circumstances will compel you to set aside a day for prayer. Whatever the circumstance, God alone transfuses the human soul with a desire to go apart for a short while to pray.

Maybe it's a critical decision to be made, a problem to wrestle, or a call to abandon and surrender some destructive habit. You might have a growing sense that you need renewal or a day to celebrate God in your life. Abraham Heschel said, "Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."

I've been drawn to set aside a day of prayer for all of these reasons mentioned above. I never thought one day could make such a difference. I discover my mind is cleared, my vision keener, and my ear better tuned to the voice of God after such a day.

I suggested a day of prayer to a friend who was wrestling with a decision to change careers in mid-life. Inserting a day of prayer into his hectic schedule didn't seem possible. However, he carved out the time and made his day-long retreat.

"I couldn't believe the difference it made. The farther I drove from my office toward my place of prayer (a beachfront cabin), the stronger God's presence seemed to grow." He returned home with a quiet assurance about his decision and immediately acted on it.

Of course, a day of prayer won't always change your life, and it won't always be earth-moving. But, as those who have made this a regular practice will testify, it is always worthwhile.

Preparation

Since it's just a day, preparation will probably be minimal. Pick a date two or more weeks in advance. Write it into your schedule, then tell someone close to you about it—a spouse, parent, pastor, or best friend, perhaps. Plan to get together with that person after your day apart to discuss what happened.

Keep it simple. Pick a place to spend the day and make arrangements. While it's best to get away from your usual surroundings, any quiet place where you won't be disturbed is fine.

I've spent my day of prayer in various places: a public park, playground, church, beach, monastery, campgrounds, cottage, hotel room, and even a tent in the woods behind a friend's house. Outdoors is especially meaningful for me, and so much better if there are lakes or mountains around.

Take along a Bible, notebook or journal, and pen. Sometimes a favorite devotional book or hymnal is helpful. Modern authors I like to read include Eugene Peterson, Sue Monk Kidd, Thomas Green, or Richard Foster. If you like classics, try St. John of the Cross, Thomas Kelly, or E.M. Bounds.

The Shape of Your Day

Of course, you don't want to be tied to a rigid schedule. Yet, you don't want to spend the time daydreaming or doodling in your journal either.

I've found it helpful to follow this model: Read a Bible passage prayerfully, slowly, with an open heart. Rather than reading it like a textbook or self-help book, listen to Scripture with a prayerful, yielded, open mind. It helps to read one word at a time, loud enough to hear yourself.

When something strikes a chord in you, stop reading and concentrate on that insight. Prayerfully meditate on it, allowing it to sink slowly and deeply into your spirit, paying attention to your inner, honest response. Don't rush.

From meditating on the Living Word, move to writing about your insight. You might do this as a written prayer to God or a journal-like record. This, too, should be done without hurry.

If new insights come to you, repeat the process. When you are ready to continue reading, go back to Scripture and begin the process again.

I like to take my readings from the gospels or epistles. Psalms are also fertile material for prayerful reading.

After doing this for two or three hours, take a break to worship and rest in God. You might select a hymn or chorus to sing. I like to pray two or three psalms also, then quietly rest in the presence of God, listening for Him to speak to my spirit.

"To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord—ever present, all seeing, within you," wrote Theophane the Recluse. This model of prayer, you've no doubt noticed, isn't about getting things from God, it's about seeking God.

Hubert van Zeller wrote, "A lot of the trouble about prayer would disappear if we only realized . . . that we go to pray not because we love prayer, but because we love God."

When I feel ready for a break, I usually take a walk and have a small meal or snack. Then, I return to praying in the same way.

I reserve the last hour of my prayer day to record my feelings, what I understand has happened, and to make commitments or plans according to any discoveries God has given me.

Ending the Day

Don't think you have to come away with an extraordinary experience or blazing new insights. By being present and available to God, you will cooperate with God the best you can.

In evaluating your day, it isn't the emotional experience that matters. It isn't new insights or resolutions. If you have become fully vulnerable to God and to the transforming power of the Word of God in Scripture, it will show in your daily living.

That's why it's important to make a habit of setting apart days for prayer. Prayer is like a

tune-up for human beings. We might get by without it, but we won't function fully.

In *An Autobiography of Prayer*, Albert E. Day asserts that prayer makes us more "God-conscious" and less "me-conscious." In asking for things for our own good and the good of others, we begin to see how little we really need and that all we do need is found in dependence on and relationship with God. So, the more we pray, the more God-conscious we become.

The result of scheduled, frequent prayer days will be an increase in everyday prayer. Prayer, I've learned, produces a desire for prayer.

Planning a day apart for prayer is a simple first step in becoming a more prayerful person. If you do so, you will soon be wondering why you didn't do it sooner.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

LONNI COLLINS PRATT is an acquisitions editor for Servant Publications. She also is a prolific freelance writer, having published over 500 articles in more than 70 magazines.

"As I grow in matters spiritual," says Lonni, "prayer becomes the center of all I'm learning. I think we've over-formulated, structured, and complicated prayer. In truth, God loves us and eagerly draws us into prayer. We don't need to worry about doing it wrong."