

**A
CHRISTIAN
SURVIVAL
GUIDE**

A CHRISTIAN SURVIVAL GUIDE

**A LIFELINE TO
FAITH AND GROWTH**

ED CYZEWSKI

A Christian Survival Guide: A Lifeline to Faith and Growth
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*To my in-laws, John and Alta Ludlam, who
are responsible for the survival of my faith
when answers failed me.*

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INTRODUCTION

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING

KING SAUL WASN'T THE guy you'd want to join on a road trip. Violent without his favorite songs and opposed to stopping for snacks, he would've tried the patience of Job. Once, his choice of a rest stop almost cost him his life.

Jealous of his servant David's military success and popular support, Saul began chasing him throughout the land of Judah. While running from Saul, David often linked his survival to the remote fresh springs of En Gedi along the Dead Sea coast. En Gedi also had a series of caves that made it an ideal location for a fugitive.

When he least expected it, David had an opportunity to secure his own survival. Unaware that David and his men were hiding in the back of the cave, Saul stepped in to relieve himself. With sword in hand, David waited for him.

However, as a man tuned in to the will of God, David resisted the opportunity to kill the king. Saul was God's anointed king, and David recognized that killing Saul to survive today would bring disastrous consequences tomorrow. Though David knew how to survive as a soldier, he also knew how to survive as a servant of God. Killing God's anointed king was an obvious sin that he could not commit.

Righteous as David appears in this scene, he couldn't resist a good

prank. I love him for this. While Saul relieved himself, David cut off a piece of his clothing. After Saul left the cave, David walked out and waved it at Saul and his company of soldiers.

I can't believe the boldness of David in this story. He was most likely outnumbered, and all of his men were trapped in a cave. If Saul so desired, he could have sent his men in to kill them all. However, Saul, at least in this case, realized that he'd been wrong to pursue David. Conceding that David was more righteous, he called off the hunt.

David placed himself at the mercy of God in that situation. He committed himself to obeying the will of God, assuring his spiritual survival even if it put his physical survival in danger. In the end, God honored David's commitment to holiness and preserved his life in the process.

SURVIVAL IS NOT A MISTAKE

Survival requires planning. What if we expected survival in the woods to happen without planning ahead?

"I'm sure I'll be able to figure out which mushrooms and berries to eat. Pine cones are nature's waffles."

"Anyone can start a fire by rubbing two sticks together. Tom Hanks did it in *Cast Away*."

"Don't they use fresh stream water to brew beer? Of course I can drink it."

"What's wrong with hiding under a tree in a thunderstorm?"

"I have the food situation covered. I can just spear fish. Did I mention that I've seen *Cast Away*?"

"I read that Chris Farley Mowat book in grade school, so I've got the wolf situation covered."

"If I find a baby bear, I'm sure its mother won't mind if I give it a big 'bear hug.'"

Choosing the right path to personal and spiritual survival was not easy or necessarily obvious. David's men thought that God had delivered Saul into his hands, but David would not let them tempt him. How did David manage to make such a cool-headed, God-honoring decision when conventional wisdom pointed to the opposite course of action? At the very least, he was prepared for survival as a follower of God when a tough situation came his way.

If David wasn't prepared to resist temptation while hiding in the cave, we wouldn't read about his kingship or his many psalms, making for a much shorter Old Testament and one less class for seminary students. Our survival as followers of Jesus may hinge on our preparations for the decisions we make and the challenges we face. David resisted killing Saul because he'd committed himself to learning the will of God and acting on it. Whether we need to cultivate specific disciplines, learn how to resist temptation, or address the nagging doubts in our lives, Christian survival doesn't just happen. It requires discipline, planning, and action. If we fail to prepare, we may fall short of God's best and even put the survival of our faith in jeopardy.

In fact, the path to "survival" isn't just a matter of doing the bare minimum to survive. When temptation hits or a dark season arrives in our lives, a flimsy faith and tacked on spiritual practices won't provide the sturdy support we need. Christian survival demands that we face the challenges to our faith and learn to rest daily in Christ, our solid foundation.

Christians who neglect their spiritual growth, the actions God calls them to take, and the teachings that ground their faith are setting themselves up for failure. Perhaps they may never fall away from God, but Jesus talked about having abundant spiritual life like a bubbling spring, not squeaking by with a Sunday morning attendance card. If the same old doubts linger or the same old sins show up at confession time, I'd suggest that it's time to take care of them before they hurt you, the people you love, and your relationship with God. In addition, we could be blindsided with tough situations or questions that disrupt what we thought to be true. There are few things more disruptive for our faith than the unexpected loss of a long-held belief. No one ever plans to fail in the Christian faith, but we do prepare ourselves for failure through neglect, just as we can prepare ourselves for survival by taking action.



When I speak of Christian survival, I'm talking about the real problems and doubts that can hinder your relationship with Jesus and your fellowship with others. In America we are bombarded with all kinds of campaigns, organizations, and agendas that are supposed to be important to us as Christians. We're told by politicians on both sides that we need to support legislation that will preserve the "moral character" of America. We learn that our country is either in danger of being taken over by maniacal socialists/fascists (which is an impossible mix by the way) who will turn America into Canada or that fundamentalists will turn our open-minded republic into the Holy Land Experience. Others warn us that men need to watch ultimate fighting or they'll start baking cupcakes and give up their careers to stay home with the kids, and that women need to raise kids and bake cupcakes lest they spend their free time watching ultimate fighting.

We are bombarded by campaigns to build museums that tout certain agendas or prove certain views of the Bible. Some lament that America is on the brink of becoming a land crawling with atheists and therefore we need to buy a certain book, attend another conference, or believe some checklist of absolutes. Others fear that America is on the brink of being overrun with religious zealots who want to take control of the minute details of our lives.

I trust that the people behind such campaigns mean well and that they love Jesus, but these "important" issues are not *essential* for our faith as Christians. I'm far more concerned about getting the basics of Christianity right: learning how to pray regularly, how to commune with the Holy Spirit, how to love our neighbors, and how to read the Bible so that we can live in relationship with Christ and do God's will on earth. If the basics are following Jesus, loving God, and loving others, shouldn't we make our top priority the removal of all potential obstacles that could keep us from God?

In addition, there are some vocal critics of Christianity who claim it has failed them and that the Jesus we know was invented by clever storytellers. They bring tough questions that demand answers. Have you ever listened to someone who left the faith? Former Christians can often bring up the kinds of survival issues we need to consider.

I once worked with this guy who was a smart, well-read, committed

agnostic. He'd converted to Christianity in college and later served as a Campus Crusade leader and a small group Bible study facilitator in his church. While he never shared the specifics, at a certain point he gave up on God. It stopped clicking for him. I'll be honest, I was afraid to even ask. It was "better" to just think I was smarter or more holy than him rather than learn about his crisis of faith. Isn't that always easier?

This situation left me perplexed. How could I relate with this colleague? My training in Christianity taught me to present the facts of the gospel, but if he already had the information, what more could I offer him? Especially if he knew everything I did and still didn't believe. How could I say anything different to change his mind?

My relationship with this agnostic colleague caused me to think deeply about my own attitude and behavior at work, especially when our personalities clashed. I had to move beyond my reliance on the right answers in order to figure out not only how to embody the gospel message but also why we were different. We both had the same information, so where did he fall off the tracks? What enables some to survive as Christians when others have faltered?

This book aims to help the saints persevere, and so we'll focus on answering that last question—what will help you survive as a follower of Jesus?

Surviving as a Christian depends on having the right beliefs, putting them into practice in community with other Christians, and most importantly, meeting with God regularly. If we fail to address basic survival matters such as understanding God's story from Scripture, defeating sin, or living in step with the Holy Spirit, we run the risk of missing out on the abundant life Jesus promised us, if not losing our intimacy with Jesus and leaving the faith altogether.

Like David, we never know when a challenge to our faith will come our way. There's no guarantee that the people around us will lead us to the right decisions. We have to take responsibility for our survival as followers of Jesus.

A KNOW-IT-ALL WITH SIMPLE ANSWERS?

By putting together this survival guide to Christianity, I run a few risks. For starters, I could give the impression that I have my act completely

together—like I’m some kind of Special Forces Christian who drags people through my personal boot camp in order to make them awesome and perfect—just . . . like . . . me. When sharing what God has done in my life, I know this is an easy mistake to make.

While I want to freely share what God has done in my life and what he has been teaching me about Christian survival, I don’t want you to forget that I still skip my Bible reading some days, fail to focus when praying, make selfish mistakes in my marriage, and cheer for Philadelphia sports teams. I also rely on coffee to the point that I feel like it should be a sin. I’ve tried to make this guide feel like I’m sharing my own story and thoughts about following Jesus with you at a café and you’ve just bought me a drink—a really large light roast coffee with a lot of caffeine.

I come to this book as a lifelong Christian who has hit some rough patches and seasons of doubt that truly threatened my own faith. I learned to ask hard questions while attending seminary, and have written about many of them in print and online. Many of the topics in this book have been extremely hard for me to confront personally. In addition, I’ve often found that almost everyone I know has struggled with many of the topics I discuss in this book. They just keep coming up in one conversation after another. At some point I had to stop running from the hard questions and tough topics. The more I dreaded a topic, the more I knew I needed to deal with it. I didn’t always end up with the range of answers I expected, but I have also met God in the places where I had the most uncertainty, shame, and weakness. I pray that you’ll find the same hope as you confront your own questions and uncertainties.

Once I convince you that I’m Joe Christian, the other mistake I can make is to minimize the problems I confront in this book or present my solutions as pat, simple, or completely satisfactory. Throughout this book I’ll aim to remain true to the difficulties and exceptions of life while dealing with truth, principles, and experiences that may prove helpful. I also want to give space for the range of Christian beliefs, practices, and experiences, offering a variety of options when appropriate. In addition, I’ve had to keep each chapter painfully short in order to cover so many topics, so keep in mind that I’m providing a simple overview that can be supplemented with further reading from the chapter-by-chapter “For Further Reading” list I’ve included at the end of the book. I may not be able to

provide answers for your every problem, but I hope that I can help you take some solid steps forward.

It's my experience that many Christians tend to hit two extremes when talking about following Jesus. We either hide our tough questions and doubts behind a happy, faith-washed veneer, or we wallow in the complexity, difficulty, and messiness of our faith without actively seeking solutions that appear too pat or inauthentic.

Either way, we avoid our doubts and questions because they're either not appropriate for good Christians or only a jerk would dare to challenge messy Christians to confront their sins and doubts. These represent fine lines we'll try to walk. Sinners are most certainly welcome, but in the

SURVIVAL TIPS

The Messy Christian and the Happy Christian can both fail to thrive as followers of Jesus.

Marks of Messy Christians

- Believe God only dispenses grace and doesn't challenge us to clean up our acts.
- Hypersensitive to judgment.
- Despite doubts and struggles, they fail to consider possible steps forward.
- Uncomfortable with words such as "certainty" or "confidence."

Marks of Happy Christians

- Would rather go to the Wednesday evening service than admit they have doubts or struggles in their Christian faith and practice.
- Desire to appear certain and together. They fear accountability and confession, especially with those "self-righteous" people at church.
- Attack those who are too vocal about their doubts or the problems they find in Christianity. It's all in the name of "defending" the faith.

grand scheme of things, you're either moving into the kingdom or out of it. At some point you need to decide whether you're going to follow a convicted insurrectionist to his execution or your own plans. There is a way forward, and it is messy, but there is real progress we can make in our walk with God.

If you're on the losing side that will one day inherit the earth, then we'll have some tough eggs to crack. However, I firmly believe that God can handle our tough questions, doubts, and struggles. There are good, if not excellent, answers and perspectives to be found in the Christian faith. I'm not guaranteeing that the suggestions and answers in each chapter will be a custom fit to your life, but they'll give you a solid base for your survival plans. Rather than letting these matters of doubt and sin simmer and eventually boil over, I suggest facing them directly.

Throughout each chapter we'll look at some common scenarios that illustrate a particular question or problem that may threaten the faith or growth of Christians. Once we're on the same page, we'll work our way through some possible solutions. Some answers or action plans will be more specific than others. For example, there are some fairly uniform steps that most Christians can take in developing good prayer and Bible study habits. However, when it comes to finding healthy Christian community, the possible solutions will vary. These chapters will offer several biblically based options even if there isn't a consensus among believers.

WE AREN'T SLACKERS FOR JESUS

While we're talking about the basics of Christian survival, I don't want to give the impression for one moment that our goal is to simply get by. In choosing to follow Jesus we are leaving the promises of this world behind for new life in his kingdom. We cannot serve two masters, and therefore we're either all in or all out. There is no in-between.

Therefore, by committing to our "survival" as Christians we are running the race with every intention of winning. Who takes marriage vows like, "I vow to do the bare minimum to prevent a divorce"? Sure, putting the toilet seat down, taking the kids out for ice cream, and buying the occasional bouquet are good things, but marriage is a full-scale commitment of yourself to another person. God's *agape* love didn't leave anything

behind when Jesus hung on the cross. God's love is all in for me and for you. This is a love worth clinging to even when we can't make sense of a tragedy that befalls a loved one or a season of confusion and uncertainty.

As we talk about our commitment to Christian survival I encourage you to think in terms of deleting the numbers of old flames from your phone before getting married. These are things that all Christians need to consider in order to shore up their faith as they move forward. If left unresolved, problems with many of the issues discussed in this book will ruin your relationship with God down the line like a call from that old girlfriend while you and your wife are going through a rough time. Like those old numbers, our sins and unasked questions cannot remain. We

THE MILK AND MEAT OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY

With my apologies to vegans and vegetarians, Christian survival aims to help you “digest” or master the basics (the milk) of the faith so you can know God better (the meat) and produce fruit. That metaphor breaks down somewhere between the meat and the fruit, but we can at least agree that fruit is good—even if it's coming from meat. Paul describes Christian maturity as milk and meat in 1 Corinthians 3:2: “I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.”

Christians Who Need Milk

- Are worldly, not living by the Spirit
- Quarrel
- Divide into factions, overemphasizing loyalty to leaders
- Serve by their own strength
- Are deceived, thinking of themselves as wise

Christians Ready for Meat

- Live in the Spirit's power
- Resolve disputes
- Reach unity in the Spirit
- Rely on the Spirit's wisdom

are preparing ourselves for a lifetime commitment to God, and therefore we need to confront our doubts and work on the basics of following Jesus before moving on to the deeper spiritual life that God has for us.

And speaking of basics, let's keep in mind that our goal in mastering these basics of Christian survival is continued growth as faithful disciples of Jesus. If you learned how to play T-ball when you were five, you probably learned how to swing a bat and throw a ball even though you weren't turning double plays. You may have had some basic skills back then, but can you imagine a group of adults getting together to play some T-ball? T-ball was a necessary step in the development of many baseball and softball players, but we are expected to build on what we learn and to develop new skills. When a professional player struggles to hit the ball, he may use a tee to work on his swing, but returning to the tee is only a temporary part of his long-term training as a hitter.

Paul spoke in terms of milk and meat when addressing the Corinthians about their spiritual growth. As they stumbled into sin over and over again, they required the basic milk of the gospel to remind them that they were free from sin. As they persisted in bickering and fighting, letting sin run rampant among them, they could not mature in their relationships with God and in their dealings with one another until they digested the milk of the gospel.

This Christian survival guide provides both milk and meat that together aim to aid disciples of Jesus in their overall spiritual growth. Some topics may strike you as more relevant than others, but I encourage you to wrestle with all of them. Chances are that at some point you will run into someone who is struggling with that very thing, and then you'll be prepared to help. At one time or another I have either personally experienced difficulties with each topic addressed or spoken with Christians and former Christians who found these matters difficult. There may be someone in your small group or family who needs your help with one of the topics covered in this survival guide.

As we move into our first survival topic, I pray that you will be guided by the Holy Spirit and encouraged as you face some tough questions and seek the answers God has for you. Our God is able.

P A R T 1

CHRISTIAN BELIEFS



PRAYER

A STILL SMALL VOICE FOR BIG LOUD PROBLEMS

TWO RADIO EXECUTIVES had been trailing Billy Graham as he preached at venues all across America in the 1950s. They wanted to sign Graham to a contract for a prime-time radio slot. The trouble was that Graham refused. Every time they found Graham's hotel, he would sneak out back doors and climb down fire escapes.

They finally caught up with Graham in Seattle, but they couldn't arrange a meeting. However, before the two execs boarded their flight, they received a message from Graham. Several business owners had offered to help pay for the radio program, and Graham decided to hear them out, even if he still needed to raise an additional \$23,000 to make the radio show a reality.

After making their pitch to Graham, they watched Graham fall to his knees and entrust the radio ministry to the Lord. In fact, after praying earnestly about the radio show, Graham asked the Lord to send him the full \$23,000 by midnight if it was God's will for him to move forward. While Graham didn't want to take away from his preaching ministry, he also believed that God could make a way for him.

That evening Graham collected donations for the radio show, but he fell short of his goal. Resolved to follow God's direction, Graham went to bed without signing the radio contract. However, before he turned out the lights, one of Graham's team members found three envelopes waiting for

him at the hotel's front desk. They made up the remaining difference to pay for the show.

We could cite a lot of reasons for Graham's success, but Graham himself made no mistake about giving all of the credit to God. Each step he took had been guided by earnest prayer, seeking God's direction and only moving when he sensed the conviction of God. That didn't mean he was spared moments of doubt and struggle. If his ministry was going to endure, he would need to continue laying his cares before God.

We can all see that someone like Billy Graham really needed to pray while planning preaching tours or paying for a national radio show. Who wouldn't need prayer for stuff like that? However, this commitment to prayer was a key part of Graham's life long before he became a world-famous preacher. As a young man he often took long "prayer walks" to seek out the will of God. Graham no doubt modeled his approach to prayer on the example of Jesus.

Surprising though it may be, Jesus spent significant amounts of time praying. Wasn't Jesus already pretty tight with God since he was a member of the Trinity? The fact that he took time to pray is a Trinitarian brain bender. If Jesus made prayer an integral part of his life, what makes us think we can do any better without it? If anything, Jesus sent us a very important message about the practice and importance of prayer. Our survival as followers of Jesus depends on it. Since our Lord modeled prayer for us, we'd better figure out a place for it in our lives.

While a recent Pew Forum poll found that 78 percent of evangelicals pray daily,¹ "prayer" could mean any number of practices that could lead to a wide variety of different results. A "win the lottery" prayer is quite different from a "give us our daily bread" prayer. While I'm glad so many value prayer, let's talk about how to pray and how prayer can help us survive as followers of Jesus.

Many Christians I know today, myself included, struggle with a condition I call "prayer guilt." We all like to pray. We all see the value of prayer. We even pray most days. However, we always feel like we never pray enough. If we have prayed, we didn't pray long enough or failed to stay focused while praying. I'll tell myself, Sure I prayed, but the prayers weren't very good. It would be nice to at least have a vision or speak in a tongue or two before checking prayer off my "to do" list.

I've spent far too many days living with an underlying sense that I should be praying more or doing more for God. I can always think of someone who must be meditating longer, reciting prayers that are more ancient, or lighting taller, brighter candles. Whether or not I'm correct, that guilt leaves me feeling inadequate and unable to approach God with the kind of confidence that Jesus talks about.

The outcomes of prayer are so hard to quantify. On the one hand we read about people who can't imagine surviving a single day without beginning it on their knees before God. And then on the other we rush from one thing to another and lay in bed at night wondering where the day went. I've gone to bed in the past thinking, "Oops, I forgot to pray today."

ONE-WAY PRAYERS

When I started to take prayer seriously, I learned a way of praying that I call "freestyle prayer." The plan was pretty simple: bow your head and start talking to God. It was way more personal than many of the prayers I'd learned to recite while growing up.

On the one hand, it was awesome. I broke through many of the barriers that I'd felt between myself and God as I shared my problems just as I would with a friend. Of course, that also meant that I talked about myself and my problems a lot. I also used up my lifetime quota of the word "just." You know these prayers: "We just want to thank you for just providing for our every need so we can just keep praying just like this . . ."

During my youth I had used prayer as a tool for absolution, saying a pile of "Our Fathers" after confessing my sins to a priest, but the freestyle prayers I learned in a small country church sent me to the other extreme. If prayer was "talking to God," I certainly had no problem controlling the conversation. I remember marveling that Jesus could spend an entire evening praying. I wondered what he talked about all night.

A few years later, my unstructured and largely undisciplined "one-way talks" with God received a little bit of direction when I learned about the "ACTS" way of praying. Christians love acronyms, don't they?

Adoration

Confession

Thanksgiving Supplication

The ACTS prayer method helped open my eyes to the place of thanksgiving and worship in my prayer life. I'd already spent a good deal of time confessing my sins so that God wouldn't hate me, and then, once I'd gotten on his good side, dumped my list of requests. This helpful little acronym cleared up some oversights on my part. Prayer wasn't just about what I needed. Prayer became a practice where I saw what God had done and who God is. While that helped, I was still missing something very, very important.

QUIET, REPETITIOUS MONKS

I've used the ACTS prayer method and would encourage others to explore it, but I've been learning that prayer isn't limited to what I say to God. Prayer can also mean listening to God. In other words, my mouth needs to be shut and my mind tuned in to God.

That's probably what Jesus did on many of those long nights spent in prayer.

Listening prayer is both really simple and nearly impossible. We don't have to "do" anything in order to hear God. In fact, we can even listen for the voice of God while we walk, cook dinner, wash the dishes, mow the lawn, build something, drive a car, or do anything else that doesn't require constant concentration. Having said that, listening prayer also calls for emptying our minds of our own thoughts in order to focus on God, and *that* is really, really hard. It's especially hard today because our phones, computers, and tablets demand constant updates and interaction.

"Just snapped a picture of my awesome prayer retreat" is the kind of online update that misses the point.

Venturing into the woods or a wilderness area isn't a guarantee that our minds will be free from distractions. The men and women who first sought out solitude in the wilderness of Egypt in the fourth century found more than enough battles in their own minds. Without household projects, traffic jams, kids, jobs, and an array of technology, they found that prayer remained quite hard. They also discovered that once removed from

Henri Nouwen writes in *The Way of the Heart* about the nature of prayer:

Thinking about God makes God into a subject that needs to be scrutinized or analyzed. Successful prayer is thus prayer that leads to new intellectual discoveries about God. Just as a psychologist studies a case and seeks to gain insight by trying to find coherence in all the available data, so someone who prays well should come to understand God better by thinking deeply about all that is known about him.

Nouwen adds:

We find the best formulation of the prayer of the heart in the words of the Russian Theophan the Recluse: “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. . . .” There God’s Spirit dwells and there the great encounter takes place.²

the temptations of the city, demons showed up to tempt them with far more regularity. Although moving into the desert helped simplify their lives, prayer remained a struggle for men and women who had left everything behind to make prayer a priority. Who doesn’t have a hard time staying still in order to pray? Who isn’t flooded with thoughts the moment you sit still?

The good news is that Christians have many different strategies for becoming quiet long enough to hear the voice of God. I resisted them for a while because I used to think that repetition was bad for prayer, let alone “recycling” what someone else wrote as a prayer. However, I’ve since learned that reciting simple prayers or slowly reading through a small passage of Scripture can break the distracting cycles of my mind and carve out a friendly spot for God to set up shop.

The one prayer that I turn to the most is the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It’s a great way to begin prayer because let’s face it: I usually have something to confess anyway.

PRAYING “THE DIVINE HOURS”

I often begin my day with this prayer:

Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought me in safety to this new day: Preserve me with your mighty power, that I may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all I do direct me to the fulfilling of your purpose; through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.³

This confession from the Book of Common Prayer is a great way to end the day:

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

This ancient prayer has been used by Christians as a tool to help train their minds to hear the voice of God. Some use it as a way to kick off a time of prayer, while others only use it if their minds start to wander, letting it renew their focus on the cross and the mercy of God to redeem us.

I’ve also used other memorized prayers at key moments in my day to help redirect my mind to God. While exercising I’ll pray the Our Father and try to meditate on each part of the prayer. What evil am I asking God to deliver us from? Who do I need to forgive? How can I trust God to provide what we need for today?

The Divine Hours is a published series of daily prayers compiled by Phyllis Tickle using the Liturgy of the Hours and the Book of Common Prayer. Three volumes cover the different seasons of the year and a couple more lead up to special times of the year (Christmas and Easter). Each day has three readings and a final “compline” with Scripture readings

and prayers from various points in church history. Some days I spend more time meditating on a passage of Scripture. Other days I freestyle my prayers.

The discipline of listening prayer has dramatically changed the way I approach prayer. My expectations have shifted dramatically, as I now expect God to speak. Some days I sense a leading or direction from God and other days I don't. Sometimes God drops in on me unannounced with a message. There are days when I'm left wondering if I really heard God speak or if it was my imagination.

Listening prayer and Christian survival are linked together. How else can we know when we are straying from God or need to adjust the course of our lives if we can't hear the voice of God? I'm well aware that this kind of prayer will be a challenge for many. When I started to practice listening prayer, I heard absolutely nothing. That promptly led to a crisis of faith. Is God real? Does God hate me? I jumped from one frantic conclusion to another.

Prayer is one Christian practice that relies on self-discipline and feedback from a trusted mentor or spiritual advisor. You need to ask hard questions about the times prayer "doesn't work" and the times you think you have heard from God but aren't sure. When I think God is leading me in a particular direction, I often check in with a trusted friend or relative to make sure I'm on the right track. Sometimes a "message from God" is downgraded to just a great idea. Other times the very thing I'm resisting is exactly what God has called me to do. The more an idea lingers and pesters me, the more likely God's speaking to me.

"In honesty you have to admit to a wise man that prayer is not for the wise, not for the prudent, not for the sophisticated. Instead it is for those who recognize that in face of their deepest needs, all their wisdom is quite helpless. It is for those who are willing to persist in doing something that is both childish and crucial."

—Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*⁴

Maybe you've always been open to the possibility that God could speak to you. Maybe this is brand new. And then perhaps you have a history of frustration and failure. Wherever you're coming from, there's a really good reason why I'm digging into the specifics of prayer. The church as we know it wouldn't exist without prayer.

PRAYER THAT SENDS US PACKING

If you've read the book of Acts and epistles of the New Testament, there's a good chance you know that Peter and Paul were both apostles with rather different callings. They were so different at times that they had sharp disagreements. Paul writes that he confronted Peter to set him straight. Although they clashed plenty of times, they shared something very important: a divine calling from God. We make a significant mistake if we think that such clarity of calling and belief is limited to apostles like them.

Peter never would have considered preaching the gospel to a Roman centurion and his household and relatives. Paul didn't know where to go on his missionary journey. He reached a dead end at Troas and only moved on to Macedonia when he had a vision of a man calling him to come help them. It doesn't strike me as fair that God would launch the church with a Holy Spirit bang and then leave future generations to sort things out for themselves with the Bible.

In fact, in one story after another, we find that many of the most dramatic conversions and ministries have come from spiritual encounters with God. In moments of prayer, meditation, visions, and dreams, God has directed saints to sell their possessions, serve the poor, negotiate peace among warring armies, and preach the gospel with boldness. In fact, you'll be hard pressed to find a significant movement in Christianity that wasn't sparked by prayer and the direct intervention of God empowering people to do extraordinary things.

We may be able to squeak by with a little bit of prayer here and there, but thriving as growing Christians has everything to do with our connection to Christ, our vine who makes us come to life and helps us bear fruit. If there is anything that could threaten your faith as a follower of Jesus, it's a lack of commitment to prayer. Without prayer we may do good

things, but there's no telling whether we'll be directed by God, and we certainly won't have the benefit of God's power and resources.

DARK NIGHTS AND BREAKTHROUGH BREAKDOWNS

In my own Protestant tradition there isn't a whole lot written about the times we fail to find God or struggle with doubts. In fact, our focus on being saved or unsaved may even create a dynamic where we see faith as a switch that's either on or off, and if things aren't working, we fear that somehow we've lost our salvation or God isn't real after all. We don't have much of a grid for seasons of struggle, depression, and loneliness. Some have been told that God is either real and capable of showing up when we pray or God is fake and will not show up when we pray. But there's a third option. God can be both real and seemingly not present for a season.

I won't even begin to speculate about the potential causes for a dark night of the soul. However, I want you to know that you're in good company if you're going through one. In her personal letters, Mother Teresa wrote about living in a perpetual season where she didn't hear from God.

A SAINT LIVING IN DARKNESS

Mother Teresa set out to serve the poor after having several mystical encounters with Jesus in 1946. She wrote in those days about her encounters with "the Voice" who asked her to serve the poorest of the poor and about her passionate love for Jesus. However, once she began serving the poor in Calcutta, she entered a prolonged season of spiritual darkness and loneliness:

In a letter estimated to be from 1961, Teresa wrote: "Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason—the place of God in my soul is blank—There is no God in me—when the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God. . . . The torture and pain I can't explain."⁵

She persevered in faith as she served the poor even if she couldn't get a direct confirmation from God for long stretches of time.⁶

I have sensed the joy of the Lord when I do certain things. I'm well aware of God's guidance for specific things in my life. However, there are many days when I don't get a clear sense of God's direction. Some days are lonelier than others when I pray. I'm stuck with persevering by faith based on what God showed me.

Some traditions see this season of alienation and darkness as a bad thing. It certainly can be that. I don't think anyone should feel alienated from God for a long time. However, these situations are not without precedent. We're in good company if we have a season of darkness or emptiness. If we're always praying for spiritual breakthroughs and come up empty, we need to stop and ask what God is teaching us in this season of loneliness and silence. Sometimes a time of waiting and anticipation can be just the thing we need even if it's not what we want. Oftentimes the seasons of my greatest needs, doubts, and struggles have made me more reliant on God than any other and have strengthened my faith in ways that I never anticipated.

That isn't to say that we should crave a dark night of the soul or downplay how difficult one can be. Rather, we fail to see that God can even use these seasons for good. All is not lost if God seems distant.



Sometimes a dramatic story like Billy Graham's request that God would provide him with \$23,000 discourages us from praying because we tell ourselves, I could never have faith like that!

However, Graham didn't start with prayers like that. He started his preaching career on lonely river banks, on street corners, and outside bars. Sometimes annoyed bartenders stepped outside to sock the young preacher in the face. Graham faced disappointments, struggles, and uncertainty over and over again. The more he stepped out in faith, the more he learned to rely on prayer.

If you're just trying to figure out how to survive as a Christian, I don't expect you to kneel down today and to ask God for a huge sum of money. Keep in mind, Graham was indecisive about whether to start the radio

ministry. It took the prompting of some Christian friends to convince him to take a leap of faith.

That feels a lot like my own prayer life. I wrestle with uncertainty and fear until God somehow prompts me to make a specific request. Don't let prayer guilt prevent you from seeking God. Jesus wants us to make our thoughts known to God much like a child would speak to a parent. If we can get past our guilt and uncertainty, we will learn the exciting news that God can't wait to speak to us.