

*The Morning Manna Diet:  
The Secret to Getting & Staying  
Spiritually Fit*



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## Introduction

Every day I get tons of emails about how to improve some aspect of my life - from finances to physical health. I turn on the television and commercials constantly are trying to do the same thing. I walk into bookstores and see rows upon rows of how-to books on everything from weight loss to improving relationships. There are also some very popular shows on television dealing with makeovers of all kinds, not only on you but on where you live.

Nothing wrong with these programs. Some are, in fact, quite good and helpful. They offer practical and tried plans and programs for enriching our lives. If you are reading this, chances are you are one of the millions who have tried, for example, the Atkins Diet or the South Beach Diet. I have tried the Atkins and it works. My physical health is much better having lost some weight and exercising more.

But what I hardly ever see are resources for the most important area of life - the nurturing of spiritual vitality, the care of the spirit, of the inner life. What about a diet for your soul? What about soul food? Persons have plans for daily exercise, strict diets they follow, good financial programs for the present and future, even counselors for their mental health or personal trainers, but often neglect the care of their own souls or do not know how to care for themselves spiritually.

I have a friend who had it all together, at least on the surface. He was successful in his business. He jogged and worked out each day. He had a financial plan in place for his future. But one day he came to me and confessed, "Something's missing. I'm missing something somewhere, somehow..."

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"Well," he replied, "I've got everything I want, everything I think I need. Things could hardly be better..."

"But something's missing?" I said for him.

"Yes, but I don't know what it is."

"Tell me this," I said. "I see you working out each morning. You enjoy that, right? It makes you feel good?"

"Right," he replied.

"You take good care of yourself physically. That's obvious. I wonder, what do you do for your spiritual life?"

He looked at me as if to say, "What in the world do you mean?"

"I mean, we are not just physical beings, you know. We are spiritual beings. We have a whole inner life, a life of the heart, of the soul that needs attention, exercise, if you will. I think what you're missing is the care of your own soul."

"You mean God?" he asked.

"Yes. The Divine. We need to nurture our spiritual lives, our sense of the Divine as much as we do our physical life. Know what it's like if you stop exercising? You begin to miss it, to feel weaker. Without spiritual exercise, without a plan, a program for renewing your spiritual vitality, we also become spiritually weak. I think that's what's missing from your life."

He was still doubtful. So I said, "Let me share something with you that has made a great difference in my life. I know you have tried the Atkins Diet because you're the one who shared it with me. It's worked for us both. But now I would like to share a diet with you that works just as well for your spiritual life. I call it, "The Morning Manna Diet. Want to hear it?" He said that he did. I explained to him that just as it wasn't easy when he first started running to stuck with that,

this spiritual diet or discipline would also be tough at first. But, like running, it would soon pay off. I am pleased to say that my friend found it thus and more. He also ended up becoming part of our church. "I've found what was missing," he said to me with a smile a few months later.

What I shared with him in words I later put into writing and it became this book. For the secret I shared is what I have learned in my own life about renewing spiritual vitality. "The Morning Manna Diet" is my own plan for getting and staying in good spiritual shape. My friend took what I shared, made it his own, and is now finding what he had been missing - a continual source of spiritual peace, strength, joy, purpose and spiritual vitality. I have shared it with others who have also found it of great help to them. It works. I use it in my own life. Now I would like to share it with you.

### **About This Book**

This book is in two parts. Part One begins by examining the meaning of spirituality as a deep yearning for contact with the Divine. Chapter 2 shows how God shares this desire to commune with us even more than we do. Chapter 3, building on our desire for God and God's desire for us, sets forth the secret of spiritual fitness which is at the heart of this book. Chapter 4 examines in detail the Morning Manna Diet and how to begin following it.

Part Two of this book is a reader and workbook section that provides you with what you need to begin following the Morning Manna Diet plan for a forty-day period. Well before that time is up, you will begin to see a profound difference in your spiritual vitality and energy. You will learn and begin to master a plan you will wish to follow the rest of your life.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Seeking the Divine**

The word or concept of "spirituality" is one that we hear quite often these days, though what people mean by it varies greatly. I even heard Madonna, the singer, using it recently on a television interview. Even "the material girl" has been lately thinking about more spiritual things. And I can't tell you how often I have heard something like this: "Oh, I'm not religious, but I am spiritual." I take that to mean that they are at least interested in and perhaps dabbling in some kind of activity that meets their understanding of spirituality, but not in any kind of traditional institution like the church.

I have a friend who's a professional consultation to some of the top 500 companies. He's a devout Christian. He says that he can't talk about religion in his seminars, but he can get away with addressing spirituality. Most everyone seems to relate to that or not find it offensive, he says.

Spirituality. It's used a lot and it means different things to folks. Depending on with whom you are talking, it can mean anything from new age religion to consulting with a psychic. Some might well find this kind of trend troublesome. Actually, I find it a positive one. At least people are admitting that there is a spiritual dimension to life. They are recognizing that they have some spiritual needs beyond the physical ones, however they might define or try to meet those needs. There is a great spiritual thirst out there. Many are discovering the truth of Jesus' words, "Human beings cannot live by bread alone."

#### **Evidence of Spiritual Hunger**

Like Madonna talking about spirituality, you see this spiritual hunger and thirst cropping up in some strange places.

I recently saw the new Disney movie, "Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl." The pirates on the ship, the Black Pearl, have all the wealth anyone could want and all the food too. Only one problem - they're dead, or at least under a curse put on them because of their thieving ways, so that no food, however fresh or delicious, has any taste to them. They appear normal except the moonlight shows they are skeletons, they are starving, dead. So, more than anything else, they want the curse lifted. One scene has two of the pirates with plates of food before them ready to consume it when the curse is lifted. That can only happen, interestingly enough, through the shedding of the blood of a special person.

If I understand the Bible correctly, all of us are under a curse too. Call it sin or selfishness or whatever you will. This curse is the great deception that happiness, meaning, fulfillment can be found in things. So the more things you have, the more money you have, fame or whatever, the happier, more satisfied you will be. But the curse is that it's never enough. There is always this hunger, this nagging need deep inside somewhere that tells you that something, something vital is missing, like my friend I told you about in the introduction. Like those pirates, lots of people may look normal, healthy, even prosperous on the outside, but in the Light are shown for who they are. Physically, sated, but spiritually, skeletal. In their quiet, honest moments, like what my friend shared with me, they know there is a hunger, a thirst deep inside them that no bread, no money, no physical thing can satisfy. There is an incompleteness, an emptiness there even though their lives may seem so full, so filled with an abundance of things. Indeed, the chests of gold and all the food about them served only to remind the pirates on the Black Pearl of just how hungry and poor they really were.

My wife just read John Grishom's book, "The King of Torts," and she was telling me about it. The main character is a lawyer who starts out wanting to help people, who pledges that

he'll never become the greedy, selfish kind of lawyer he sees in others. But when success does happen, he forgets all of that. He is wealthy and buys everything you can imagine, but is never satisfied, for no matter how much money he makes and things he buys, it's never enough. He's cursed.

Remember the story of Zacchaeus in the Bible (Luke 19:1-9)? He was wealthy too. He had everything money could buy. His cupboards had the best of bread in them. His table was set with the best food money could buy. Yet, there was a hunger deep inside him that led him to climb a tree to get a peek at a carpenter from Nazareth who called himself "the Bread of Life." Jesus sees him, calls him down, and goes to his house to eat with him. For the first time in his life, Zacchaeus finds food for his soul. It forever changes him.

I have a friend who's a nurse. It's much more to her than a profession - she sees it as a ministry. In fact, she carries around with her a pocket New Testament and knows how to use it. If her patients request it, she reads from it and has prayer with them. She recently told me about one patient. She was about to leave his room one day when she asked, "Mr. Smith, is there anything you need?" To her surprise he replied, "Yes. I need God." She sat down and shared with him out of her own relationship with God.

### **A Lesson from the Turtles**

One morning, when I was about seven years old, my father and I went for a walk on the beach. We were staying a few days with my aunt who lived in Florida. I loved going to my aunt's house because she lived so close to the beach.

As we walked along that morning I saw something ahead I had never seen before. At first I thought they were sand crabs, those fiddler crabs that live on the beach and dig deep tunnels



into the sand where they hid or go when the tide is high. But these were not crabs at all. There were hundreds of them and they were crawling with all their might toward the sea.

As we got closer, I saw that they were baby turtles. But they were not like any turtles I had seen. They were dark and had flippers.

"What are they?" I asked my father.

"They are loggerhead turtles," he replied.

"But where did they come from?" I asked.

"Up there in the sand dune," he said.

We walked up to the dunes and sure enough they were coming from there, except they were crawling up from beneath the sand.

"Loggerhead mother turtles," he explained, "crawl up onto the beach, usually at night, dig a large hole in the sand, and lay their eggs. The eggs are small, about the size of a ping pong ball. And they lay a hundred or more. Then they cover up the nest with sand. About two months later, with the sun warming the eggs beneath the sand, they hatch. The baby turtles then climb out of the nest through the sand and instinctively crawl toward the ocean."

There must have been several nests around there because there were so many baby turtles. We stood for a long time watching them crawl out of the sand and make their way toward the sea, some instinct, some yearning deep inside them calling them toward that life-giving ocean.

Suddenly, I noticed that something was wrong. People had made many sandcastles all along the beach. They even had deep moats around them that still had seawater in them. Some of those little turtles had fallen into those moats and were swimming around and around, thinking, no doubt, that they were in the ocean. But they were not. Unless they made it to the ocean, they

would certainly die. And there was no way they could get out of those moats on their own. How sad to see them, swimming with all their might toward what they thought was the sea. Hearing the sea, sensing it, smelling it all around them. So close and yet so far.

"We have to do something," I said, looking up at my father.

"Well, we're really not supposed to disturb them. But I think it would be okay if we helped some of them out," he said with a smile.

So we began to gently pick them up and lay them on the beach. I remember how good it felt to see them then make a beeline for the surf, disappearing into the green ocean water. But there were so many of them and so many moats. I knew it was going to take us awhile to rescue them all.

After some time, I noticed something. The tide was coming in. The waves were carrying further and further up the beach. They began to fill the moats, lifting the baby turtles gently up and taking them out to sea. We sat in the sand and watched as wave after wave slowly but surely came and rescued one turtle after another. I remember waving goodbye to each one.

I think, like those sea turtles, each of us is born with this deep hunger, this yearning that makes us strike out on a journey for our own life-giving ocean. We human beings are seekers. We feel this need inside us to be immersed in something greater than we are. We hear the Sounds of this Great Sea calling to us to come and plunge in. This need, this hunger, this thirst is for God.

The Psalmist says it this way:

*O God, you are my God, I seek  
You,  
My soul thirsts for you;  
My flesh faints for you,  
As in a dry and weary land  
Where there is no water (Psalm 63:1)*

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote:

*O Lord, you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.  
(St Augustine, 5th century)*

The starting point for learning the secret of spiritual vitality is this recognition of a need no physical thing can satisfy, this inner yearning, this longing for the Divine.

Take a moment now for some honest reflection. Where, when and how have you experienced this inner hungry?

## Chapter 2

### The Divine Seeking Us

I just spoke of the loggerhead turtles, some of them getting into a sandcastle moat and not being able to get out on their own. They were seeking the sea, to immerse themselves in it. But many got in the moat and couldn't make it to the sea. So the sea came seeking them as the tide rolled in, the waves washed into that moat, gently lifting those little turtles out of the moat and taking them out to sea, out to life.

The heart of my faith as a Christian is that this is also what God is always doing. We, too, get stuck in moats, call it sin, call it whatever. We seek the Sea, too, we seek to be immersed in that which is greater than we are, that which we know can give us life - God. But moats abound. So we fall into them and swim around and around seeking the Sea. So, the Sea has sought us, has done for us what we could not do for ourselves - lifted us out of the moats and immersed us in life, immersed us in God. These waves that wash into these moats are waters of pure grace. Indeed, even this yearning, this sense of spiritual need is itself due to the grace of God, God's prevenient grace working in our lives. Or, to say it another way, this yearning we have for God is in reality the result of God's seeking us and yearning to be in communion with us.

### Who's Doing the Chasing?

Tommy Tenney has written a bestselling set of books entitled, "God Chasers." He does a pretty good job of describing the kind of hunger and yearning for God. But I think it's often the other way around - we are the ones running away and God is often the one doing the chasing. God is not playing a game of hide-and-seek with us. God is constantly on our heels.

Jacob, that old con man of the Bible (see Genesis 28), unwittingly stumbles upon holy ground one night and falls to sleep on God's front porch. Had he known this, he probably would

have moved on a few more miles. But would it have made any difference? Nope. God has a way of finding us. As the Psalmist says, "Where can we flee from God's presence?" We can never be anywhere God can't find us. Jacob is not searching for God. God is searching for Jacob. Though Jacob does not know it, he is, in fact, searching for himself, his true self, his purpose, and he cannot find himself until he is found by God and finds God. The astounding news is that God is seeking him and finds him, will not let him go. God is indeed, "The Hound of Heaven," to borrow a phrase from Francis Thompson. God's onto our scent, never forsaking us or giving up on us, seeking our presence, our love, and seeking to use us for greater things than we now know. Even this spiritual yearning we've been talking about is one more way that God is wooing us to slow down, calling to us to not be afraid, to stop trying to hide.

To be sure there are disciplines, practices, holy habits we can use to help ourselves be found, to come out of hiding and actively seek God's seeking Presence. What I will share in the next few chapters is a plan, a discipline I have used and found the most helpful. But none of these would be effective, no amount of God chasing would be successful without this astounding, amazing fact - God is seeking us! God longs to be in relationship with you. And God takes the initiative to make that happen.

### **Making Contact**

Sometime ago an interesting and rare movie came out, based on a book by Carl Sagan, that wonderful scientist and teacher, who died far too young. It was entitled, "Contact." It's the story of Dr. Ellie Arroway, played by Jodie Foster, a radio astronomer who has dedicated her life to the cosmological field of SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence). She uses a giant radio telescope in Puerto Rico to scan the skies for signals that might originate from intelligent beings. Raised by her father, who dies when she is young, Ellie all her life feels alone and seeks

to make contact (the movie even begins with her on a ham radio trying to make contact with someone). That longing lifts her eyes to the heavens. As a scientist, she does not believe in God or the supernatural. But in the course of the movie she does have a faith experience of sorts. She makes contact! A signal is heard from the distant stars and that signal carries instructions for a machine that can be built to send someone back to the source of that message. Ellie is chosen to go. I will not tell you what happens, for you may wish to see the movie (I encourage you to see it for it treats religion and faith with respect and intelligence, something rare for Hollywood these days). Suffice it to say that Ellie learns she is not really alone, that none of us are. And that knowledge changes her life and she becomes a kind of messenger that contact is possible, that we are not alone.

Every one of us is Ellie. Each of us has deep inside this longing, this need for contact, this hunger for communication, for connection with that which is beyond us, greater than us. Though she would not say it this way, it is to me the need for contact with God. The wondrous news is that God wants this contact even more than we do.

Let me say it this way - and it really is astounding no matter how often I think about it and say it:

As much as we might long for, yearn for God, seek God - God longs, yearns and seeks for us even more! God wants to know you, to be known by you. God wants to be your most enjoyable companion each and every second of your life! In fact, God wants this so much that God has gone to extraordinary lengths to make this happen.

### **The Trinity - God Seeking Contact With Us**

The heart of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God has always been seeking us, desiring a relationship with us. In other words, the Trinity helps us explain how God has sought contact with us.

This in itself is an astounding claim. For as the Psalmist says when he realizes how vast the universe is and how very small we are in comparison, who are we that God would take notice, would want to be close to us (see Psalm 8)? Yet, God does! Imagine this: The Creator of the Universe wants to contact you! Wants to talk to you! Wants to have a relationship with you!

And we do not have to build a machine to enable us to make this contact. God has taken the initiative. God has called! God has e-mailed us! God has come looking for us! That's what the Trinity is all about.

#### *God Above Us - God the Father*

Look above you and around you, see God in the vastness and magnificence of the starry heavens, in the majesty of the earth with its mountains and seas, it's teeming with such variety of life.

"The heavens declare," the Psalmist writes, "the glory of God."

Each time I look at the starry heavens and in the wonders all around me, I get a glimpse of the greatness of God the Father, the Creator.

#### *God With Us - God the Son*

But that's not all. That's not good enough. That does not tell us all God wants us to know. So God came to be one of us in Jesus. His name is "Immanuel," that is, God with us! In Jesus we see the face of God, we hear the voice of God. We no longer have to guess what God is

like, we can know God now by looking at and listening to Jesus. Jesus connects us to God! In Jesus God contacts us as never before!

So I do not have to just look to the heavens to find God. More than that I have found that the closer I get to Jesus, the more I know of him, the closer I am and the more I know about God.

*God Within Us - God the Holy Spirit*

But God goes even further. Above and around us, we see and hear God. And in Jesus we discover God with us. But in the Holy Spirit, God makes the greatest contact of all - God comes and lives within us. We are, Paul writes, the temple of the Holy Spirit. The very presence of God lives in us.

God the Father - God above us and around us.

God the Son - God with us as one of us.

God the Spirit - God within us.

God is the one really doing the seeking, the One seeking to make contact.

Let me write this again - God is seeking contact with you. Why? Because God really loves you. God wants to be your most enjoyable companion each moment of your lives. In fact, as Christians we believe because of the resurrection of Christ that God wants this fellowship to never end, to go on for all time as the Son is preparing a room for us in Father's house, in the God's presence forever (see John 14). That's how much God longs to contact us, to be with us, to be known and loved by you.

We seek, we hunger for the Divine. Wonder of wonders, the Divine seeks and hungers for us!

But how might we find one another? Keep reading.



## **Chapter 3**

### **The Secret**

Here's the heart of this book - the secret I want to share that has taken me a long time to learn and begin to use. It grows out of my own hunger for God and discovery that God seeks me. It has made a tremendous difference in every part of my life, from my work to my family life. It is something that if you will faithfully do it, it will also make a profound difference in yours.

Let me tell you how I came to begin to understand this...

#### **Early One Morning...**

I often wake up in the morning and the first thoughts on my mind are checking my Things to Do List, you know, your agenda for the day. Even before I'm out of bed, I am adding to it, rearranging it, deciding what needs to be done first. I can't speak for everyone, but by the time I've gone over this list in my mind several times, having got up, showered, and dressed, I feel rushed, pushed, even overwhelmed. There's so much to do and seemingly so little time to do it all. I kind of feel like those racehorses, you know, behind the gate, ready to jump when the alarm or signal goes off and the gates are open, and then the whole day is a race, a hectic rush from one thing to another. From what I see of many others, they have the same kind of hectic pace to their lives.

Well, I got tired of it. No matter how good a runner you are, you can't run all the time, you can't keep up that kind of pace. You'll collapse somewhere along the way. I figured there had to be a better way to begin a day and continue it.

One morning some time ago when I suppose my To Do List was overflowing, I woke up well before the sun did. I couldn't go back to sleep so I got up, went downstairs, and went out onto the front porch. I sat down in the rocking chair Michael, my son, built for his mom back in

his shop days in high school. It must have been at least an hour before sunrise, you know, that time when the world is still drowsy, the air is still heavy with dew, and everything is as still as stone. I shoved the To Do List aside for a moment just to be there in that moment, in that place. Then I heard it. One at first. Then another, and another, and another, until there was a chorus... a choir of birds.

Yes, well before the sun rose, these little birds in the maple and oak trees about our house were awake and singing. I thought it a bit strange. Why would they be doing that? Was it their way of taunting our two cats, Simon and Evie, "Hey, you fur faces, didn't get us last night, did you?" Or was it that they were just greeting one another, letting others know that they had made it through the night or telling each other where the early worms were? Or was it that they, like roosters, thought their singing made the sunrise? Or, then a very strange, yet wonderful thought came to mind - did they do this, and they do it every morning - as a way of giving praise to the Creator? Was it their offering of thanksgiving for safety through the night and another day for living and flight?

The birds, contrary to popular myth, did not begin with a hectic hunting of the early worm, they began their day with joyous singing, with opening their little eyes and their tiny voices, before spreading their wings to fly here and there, to fill the world with their song to the Creator.

### **The Secret Is Revealed**

As I sat there that morning, those little birds shamed me. For that was hardly ever the way I started my day, as I've already said. How many days I have begun without a song, without even a thought of the Creator. It came to me how utterly foolish it was to begin any day without doing such, without at least a prayer to the One who had also seen me through the night, the One

who, I hoped and trusted, would also see me through the day. And then and there I vowed that this would change, that I would learn this lesson from my feathered friends - that my first and most important thought and act of each morning would be to sing to my Creator, to set my mind on God, to seek God's presence as the number one item always on my To Do List.

I have discovered that how we begin each day, our first thoughts and actions, set the pace, the mood, the direction for the whole day. By beginning my day by seeking God, it has brought to me such a sense of calm, of peace, of empowerment and guidance that stays with me the whole day and beyond.

I remember when Meredith, my daughter, was just a little thing. She was our morning alarm clock. She'd come, first thing in the morning, running into our room and bounding onto the bed, shaking us into consciousness with, "Good morning, mom and dad! I love you!" It seemed that her day just wasn't right until she had first thing re-connected with us, knew that we were there, that she was not alone. Then everything seemed to be okay.

I have learned the same thing. When I start my day lifting my eyes and voice to God, "Good morning, God. I sure love you!" then it changes the whole tone of the day, it brings me a center, a focus, a sense of well being that goes with me the whole day. When problems arise, they don't seem as overwhelming. When the day brings decisions, great and small, I sense a Presence there guiding me. Throughout the day I have this sweet sense of Presence and peace that impacts everything I do, think, and feel. And on those days when I've gotten back into my racehorse habits, I can really tell the difference.

In my study of John Wesley's life, the founder of Methodism, I discovered that he, too, knew this secret. He would get up about 4 or 5 every morning and spent the first hours in prayer and Bible reading. Today you can see the small room in which he did this in Wesley Chapel in

London. No doubt this was a large part of why he was able to do all the things he did for the cause of Christ.

Bishop Ralph Cushman wrote a poem some time ago that says so well what I have discovered. It goes like this:

*I met God in the morning  
when the day was at its best,  
And His Presence came like sunrise,  
Like a glory in my breast.*

*All day long the Presence lingered,  
All day long He stayed with me,  
And we sailed in perfect calmness  
O'er a very troubled sea.*

*Other ships were blown and battered,  
Other ships were sore distressed,  
But the winds that seemed to drive them,  
Brought to me a peace and rest.*

*Then I thought of other mornings,  
With a keen remorse of mind,  
When I too had loosed the moorings,  
With the presence left behind.  
So, I think I know the secret,  
Learned from many a troubled way:  
You must seek Him in the morning  
If you want Him through the day!*

### **Morning Manna**

In Exodus 16 we read a fascinating passage about the manna God gave to the children of Israel to sustain them in the wilderness as they journeyed to the Promised Land, to where God wanted them to be. What I find so interesting is that the manna only came in the morning. In fact, Exodus 16:21 reads, "Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted." Unless they gathered it first thing in the morning, they lost it. They couldn't find it the rest of the day.

My experience has been similar to this - that there is manna for us, morning manna, that's available to us in the morning that may well not be as available later. There are, in other words, blessings, spiritual manna, bread from heaven God gives to those who turn to God first thing in the morning, gathering what they need for another day of journeying to where God is leading them.

I read somewhere that most Americans skip breakfast; just too busy to eat, but that breakfast may be the most important meal of the day. I fear that far too many of us have been skipping the spiritual breakfast, God's morning manna that we need for the day ahead of us, so we lack the spiritual power and energy to face and do whatever the day brings.

But how can we sit and partake of the Lord's morning manna? How can we begin our day by making sure we are walking with God? Much of the rest of this book will answer these questions. For right now, however, consider these two things.

### **Make the Commitment**

Decide right now that this is how you will begin your morning, even if you have to rise a little early to do so. Train your brain, discipline your spirit so that your first thoughts are of God. Commit yourself first thing each morning to open your heart, to focus your mind on God. Then...

### **A Quiet Place**

There's a wonderful verse in Mark 1:35a, the first part of it says of Jesus:

And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place...

Jesus had to go seeking a quiet, lonely place in order to help him focus on God. You need to do that too. Maybe it's in a chair on your front porch, or at your table, or a stroll down a trail. Find your own quiet place.

### **Your Covenant**

Right here and now, begin to learn and live out this secret to spiritual vitality by entering a covenant with God. Commit yourself to the Morning Manna Diet.

Complete this:

Today, \_\_\_\_\_ (date), I \_\_\_\_\_ (your name), commit myself to seeking God's presence the first thing every morning no matter where I am. My quiet place or places will be \_\_\_\_\_.

Whatever you do, however you do it, do this - wake up seeking God. Spend whatever time you can, wherever you can, however you can in starting your day by focusing, centering on God. I can't tell you enough the profound difference this can make in your life. The chapters that follow will give details of this Morning Manna Diet, a plan for how to seek and be found by God each morning in your quiet place.

## Chapter 4

### Using the Secret

So, you know the secret - to seek God in the morning, assured that God's seeking you, to never leave home without first consuming your Morning Manna. But how do you do this? How can you open yourself to God's presence first thing in the morning? How can you find the manna, this bread from heaven that God so readily provides?

What you will find in this chapter is the Morning Manna Diet, a plan that involves the following ingredients:

**Centering** - a technique for focusing the mind on being quiet and open to God

**Praise** - determining the one thing for which you will give thanks/praise to God each day

**Principle** - beginning to look and listen for the new truth God is seeking to teach you

**People** - seeking God's guidance on how you might use the day in love of neighbor

**Prayer** - opening your heart and mind fully to God

#### Centering - Finding Your Still Point

One of the undergraduate colleges I attended was Atlantic Christian College (today it's Barton College) in Wilson, North Carolina. The religion department there was top notch. One of my professors, William Paulsell, was the first one to introduce me to the great mystics of the Church like St. Teresa of Avila, and the importance of nurturing my own spiritual life. Out of this kind of concern, the religion students with the support of the faculty built a small round building on the campus that was named, "The Still Point." It was a simple, round shaped building but on a quiet part of the campus. It had cushions for kneeling or laying down. It was an oasis of quietness and stillness in what got to be sometimes a desert of stress and strain. I often

went to that quiet place to seek the still point in my own heart. Almost always I left refreshed and ready to take on whatever tasks presented themselves.

I want to introduce something to you right at the beginning, an exercise, a skill you need to master that will really help your spiritual growth. It's been called several things - centering down by the Quakers, I believe, or just "centering," or finding your "still point." St. Augustine talked about this as "recollection," how he felt the need for the many parts and pieces of him needed regularly to be "re-collected," brought together into a sense of wholeness, calm, quietness.

The mind is a wondrous instrument, but it's unruly, undisciplined, hard to control. It's constantly being bombarded from the outside and inside with stimuli so that we can find it hard to focus, feel frazzled, disconnected, disjointed, overwhelmed.

Centering or finding your still point is a way of training the mind, of disciplining it to help filter out all that stimuli so that you enter your own inner still point, you have your own bubble of peace and calm that you can enter that deflects all the myriad of other things that seek your attention. Centering is clearing your mind so that you are able to focus, to concentrate, to open yourself better to the presence of God and that which God would have you think, see, hear, and do. And because of this, you feel empowered, calm, strong, ready to let in the other things that will need your time and attention - but also so focused that you will be able to discern among those things what truly needs your time and attention.

This spiritual discipline of centering, of building your own inner still point and regularly entering it has become for me as vital to my spiritual life as eating, drinking and sleeping are to my physical self. It is how to begin your morning opening yourself to God's presence.



There are various ways to go about centering, but I have found what works best for me is reading something, usually a passage from the Bible and something from a devotional book (see Appendix A in the back of this book for a list of suggested books to read. Also, in part 2 of this book I have provided you with some readings as well as a whole plan for how to use them). So, below you will find a way to go about centering, beginning with reading.

1. Choose something to read...

- a) a Bible passage
- b) the Lord's Prayer or some other favorite Prayer
- c) the Ten Commandments
- d) the Beatitudes
- e) a devotional reading
- f) the Morning Manna section in this book (Part 2)

2. Read it 3 times, at least one time out loud

3. The third time you read it, prayerful listen for a word or phrase that speaks to you, that draws you to it. This word or phrase will act as a center or focus for you during the time of meditation to follow.

4. Get in a comfortable position...

- a) sitting
- b) kneeling
- c) standing
- d) lying down
- e) whatever is comfortable for you

5. Close your eyes to help shut out what's going on around you...

6. When you are comfortable, say your focus word or phrase to yourself several times until all other thoughts, distractions are gone, leaving you just with that word or phrase. The goal is to focus on that word or phrase so that nothing else is in your thoughts...

7. See or hear then this word or phrase as words spoken directly to you by God. By focusing on them, you are focusing yourself on God's presence, opening your ears to hear God's voice. You are saying to God through this that you long to be with and to hear God.

8. Distractions will come. Items from your busy agenda will try to force their way into your thoughts, grab your attention, crowd out your calm. Anticipate that they will come. Expect them. They are normal, especially when you first begin this kind of discipline. But when they come, just repeat as often as you need your focus word or phrase until the distractions are gone...

9. After a period of time (10 minutes at least) say a prayer like the Lord's Prayer or one of your own, just whatever you feel and think - say it to God...or spend a couple of more minutes in complete silence before opening your eyes...

I have also provided for you another centering exercise in Appendix B. It's one of my favorites.

Like all things, this takes practice. Don't think you'll be great at it right at the start. But the more you do it, the better you will become, the easier it will be to do. In fact, in time you will begin to depend on this and wonder how you ever made it without the direction and nourishment this gives you. But this is only the beginning - the centering - the opening of ourselves to God. Then comes...

### **Praise**

My first Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Lib, taught me so many things. But one of the most important was to nurture an attitude of gratitude by identifying at least one blessing every day for

which to give thanks that whole day. That's a habit I still continue as part of my morning manna diet.

The Psalmist says:

"But I will sing of thy power; yea, I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning: for thou hast been my defense and refuge in the day of my trouble" (59:16).

And in Lamentations 3:18ff we hear:

And I said, "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord:

Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall.

My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled within me.

This I recall to my mind, and therefore have I hope.

It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.

They are new every morning: great is their faithfulness."

How easily our troubles may begin overwhelming us, clouding our minds, robbing us of our peace, even first thing in the morning. But in these verses, I hear that we are to begin our day not thinking of our burdens but of our blessings; not of our miseries but of the mercies of God.

After centering each morning, move to praise, to naming one blessing, one mercy, one good thing God's given you, even though it may be a small thing, and focus on it, giving you then an attitude of thanks and gratitude you can carry throughout the day.

### **Principle**

In Psalm 143:8 we hear:

"Cause me to hear thy lovingkindness in the morning for in thee do I trust: cause me to know the way therein I should walk for I lift up my soul unto thee."

And Isaiah 50:4 says:

The Lord hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.

These wonderful passages tell us as we seek God's morning manna to say to God, "Lord, I am your student, your pupil. Teach me what I need to know for this day. Let me learn some new truth that I can use in my own life and share with others I may meet."

For us, every day is a school day. School never lets out. Every morning we begin in our quiet place with centering, then praise, then making it a classroom, seeking some new and much needed instructions for living from the Great Teacher.

I am amazed that as I have done this in my own life, this focusing on God, this seeking the morning manna, that almost without fail some new truth, some new insight does come, often from the reading I started with for centering. But other times it does not come right then, but later that day as I have prepared my heart and my ears to listen, to be alert to whatever it is that God knows I need to learn.

### **People**

I am a great admirer of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. As mentioned earlier, Wesley made sure to seek his morning manna every day, as well as other disciplines to help him grow in his love for God. But one of the things Wesley also taught and lived was that it was not enough to just concentrate on one's own soul, one's own relationship with God. Love of God and love of neighbor go together. So Wesley spoke of "works of mercy," like these...

- using your money, time, gifts to help the poor
- visiting prisoners
- caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans

- providing education for those who can't afford it
- opposing evil in society (as Wesley opposed gambling, slavery, and alcoholism)
- and in general doing all the good you could to everyone you could every opportunity you get

Wesley taught and lived that both love of God and neighbor go together. You cannot have one without the other. Growing in the love for God results in growing in love of neighbor.

So, as part of the morning manna diet plan, I always take time to remind myself that I will meet others each day, starting with the persons in my own family, who may need me to listen, to care, to share, to just be there for them. I make it a priority to be on the alert for persons I can serve, knowing that in and through them I also can sense the presence and love of God.

### **Prayer**

Mark 1:35 reads:

And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.

And Psalmist says:

"My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up" (Psalm 5:3).

I always end my morning manna feast with a time of prayer. Taking into account all that I have done that morning through centering, reading, praise, seeking the principle for the day, and thinking of others, I then open my heart and mind to God, letting whatever words, thoughts, concerns, needs, desires come forth.

But you might well ask, "I don't know how to pray. How do you pray?"

If you go through centering, praise, principle, and people exercises above, lots of times your prayers will just naturally pour forth from you, especially as you practice this morning discipline. But I also use a couple of models for prayer that I share. Appendix C is a simple model using your fingers to help guide you in prayer.

A minister once visited an elderly man in his church. The man was sick and confined to bed. The man confided to his pastor, "I don't know how to pray. I don't know what to say. When I do, it seems my words are so simple, so empty. They don't seem to go any higher than that ceiling. Can you teach me how to pray?"

The pastor thought for a moment. Then he stood up and went across the room, got a chair, and sat it right beside the man's bed. He said, "When you talk to God, just imagine that God's sitting right here in this chair. Talk to God just like you would then to your dearest friend."

The man thought about that for a moment. "Well, it sounds just a little silly to me," he said. "My family already thinks I've lost my mind and if they see me talking to a chair, well...But I'll give it a try."

Several weeks passed by. The pastor received a call from the daughter of the man. "Can you come over?" she asked. "Father has died. We need you here."

Soon the pastor arrived at the house. The man's daughter greeted him at the door and escorted him upstairs to her father's room. But before she opened the door, she said, "We're so glad you are here. Just take a look and tell me if you can explain what Father was doing."

She opened the door. The two of them walked in and stood beside the man's bed. There's was an empty chair pulled right up beside him and on it rested the old man's hand...

With tears in his eyes, the pastor said after a moment, "Yes, I think I can explain that..."

### **How Much Time?**

I find that I can feast on this morning manna over about a thirty-minute period. Sometimes it's shorter, sometimes longer. In fact, more often than not I find it takes longer for me because I receive such a peace and blessings from it that I am reluctant to end it. I also make sure that I get up early enough so that I can give this the time it deserves, without being rushed.

### **But This Isn't Just for the Morning**

You will find as you master this morning manna diet, that you can then use it or parts of it all day. Throughout the day, whenever you think of it and especially when you feel the need for that calm centering again, just close your eyes and repeat your focus word or phrase. In other words, use that focus word or phrase throughout the day as needed.

You will also find yourself, for example, thinking about your blessing of the day for which to give thanks. When you do, say a word of pray and praise.

The reading may well stick with you, giving you the principles, insights just when you need them.

I am amazed at how easily, after doing this for some time, I can find my still point again, even in the midst of a noisy, trying day. I then tap that spiritual nourishment for whatever tasks and decisions are confronting me.

### **Here's How to Begin**

This next part of this book, *The Morning Manna Reader & Workbook*, provides you with the resources you will need to begin using the Morning Manna Plan discussed above. A reading is provided to help you begin to center. Space will be provided to help you identify your key word or phrase, your praise item for the day, the principle you feel God is teaching you, the

person or persons you will seek to serve during the day, and a place for you to write your prayer (sometimes a prayer is provided for you, but you are encouraged to write your own.)

Although you will use this plan in the morning, you will find that you can often go back to it, adding comments, adding to your prayer, recording thoughts and insights as the day progresses. In fact, it's a good way to bring closure to the day by going back over it at some point in the evening to review and makes notes on the day. In this way we begin each day, we spend each day, and end each day with our thoughts turned to God. You will be amazed at the renewed spiritual vitality you will receive through making sure you get your morning manna each day.



## Day 1

Reading:

### *A Most Enjoyable Companion*

Some years ago I met Dan Jordan, Director of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home. Jordan took us on a tour of Monticello. During the course of that tour, Jordan said something I have never forgotten. He talked about a visit Dumas Malone had recently made there. Malone is one of the chief biographers of Jefferson. Dumas said to Jordan, "Jefferson has been a most enjoyable companion over the years."

"Jefferson has been a most enjoyable companion over the years...."

My first thoughts were, "How can this be? Jefferson has been dead over 150 years."

Then I realized what this man was saying. He had spent his life studying Thomas Jefferson; reading everything Jefferson wrote or that had been written about him. I imagine that his circle of friends was made up of those who had done the same thing. For him, Jefferson was a living presence, indeed, "a most enjoyable companion."

What a wonderful experience this is...that the power of life, of personhood is such that persons long deceased can still live, can still walk with us and become most enjoyable companions.

My wife has started back to college and is taking music history. She has discovered a most enjoyable companion in Beethoven. So now Beethoven's a new member of our family. Beethoven lives!

I was at a bookstore some time ago and met someone who was looking for some obscure book on Sherlock Holmes. This woman knew everything there was to know about Holmes. He had been a most enjoyable companion over the years, and he wasn't even real!

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the minister at Riverside Church in New York for many years, has been one of my most enjoyable companions over the years. Never met him. Never even actually heard him preach, but through his books and especially his published sermons he has become a living companion to me. One of my most prized possessions is a book of his sermons which he signed.

Is this not true in your life as well? Perhaps there are persons alive or even long deceased who maybe you have never personally met but you would call them "most enjoyable companions." Who has been like this for you?

The thought comes to me that if the power of human personhood is such that it can transcend time and distance, so as to become enjoyable companions, than how much of an enjoyable companion can the Living God be for us!

You see, what this biographer said so eloquently about Jefferson is what I strive for more than anything else in my life - to have God as my "most enjoyable companion."

That's what I want for my life, to know God like that. That's what I want for you.

As we read the Genesis account, we see that human beings were created for fellowship, companionship with God. Adam and God walk together, talk together. That is our birthright as creatures created in the image of God.

I have been a Christian most of my life and have been a part of the church all my life. I have seen, heard and experienced a lot in my Christian pilgrimage. You know what? I think it all boils down to this: Is God real to us? Is God our "most enjoyable companion"?

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now. If you need to refresh your memory on how to center, see the first part of chapter 4 in Part I:

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### **Praise**

Based on the reading above, list below those persons who have been most enjoyable companions for you. Say a prayer of praise and thanks to God for each of them.


### **Principle**

From the reading above, what truth, theme, or principle do you feel God would have you learn this day? Write it in your own words in the space below...

### **People**

Looking over the most enjoyable companions you identified above, pick at least one (and more, if you wish) to contact today, if possible, with a call, an email, a letter, or to honor them in some way.

*Person*

*How I Will Thank/Honor Them*

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**Prayer**

From all you have done above, here just let your heart pour out to God. What's on your heart and mind? Write your prayer in the space below if you wish.

End that time of prayer with your centering word or phrase, then allow a couple of moments for complete silence.

## Day 2

Reading:

### *God Loves Us*

We see this astounding truth on every page of the Bible - God loves us. God wishes to walk with us, to be our most enjoyable companion.

Do you really hear that?

The Creator of the Universe - God - wishes to be with you, not once in awhile, but each second of your life.

The incarnation is the greatest proof of this. In Jesus we believe God became one of us, came to us, in order to restore us to the intimate fellowship with God for which we were created.

Why God loves us so, I cannot say. Only that I know God does.

God loves you. God started loving you even before you were born! God has surrounded you with love all your life, even though you may not have known it or recognized it for what it truly was. God has been there for you, loving you, providing for you.

You are alive, aren't you? God gave you that life.

You are breathing. God gives each breath as a gift.

The sun rises each day to give life to the creation and to you. The sun is God's gift.

You have had persons in your life, at least two to begin with through whom God brought you into the creation. Through them and countless others, some you may never know, God has loved, nurtured, protected, taught and cared for you. Those persons, too, are gifts from a loving God to you.

The gifts, the talents, and the abilities you are beginning to discover, they come from the Great Gift Giver.

Maybe not always, but most of your life you have had clothes to wear, a roof over your house, work for your hands, friends, money when you most needed it, food for your table, health and so many more blessings. These countless gifts are from a loving God who wants you to know you are loved.

This news is almost too good to be true, isn't it? God loves us. God is with us, always. We do not have to do anything, to be anything, especially not saints with glowing haloes in order for God to love us and be with us. God's love is unconditional.

I have two children; special blessings from God. Although I am not always pleased with them (or they with me), there has never been a time nor will there ever be a time when I cease to love them. They do not have to be or do anything to earn my love. They are loved for they are my children. They are my beloved ones. They always will be.

Do you understand this? The same is even more so with God. No matter who you are, what you have done, God loves you. You may not feel worthy of God's love, but that does not shut you off from God's love. You are loved, any way. You are accepted, anyway. All you need do is accept this acceptance, dare to believe it, and to know that you are loved. That will surely make profound changes for your life, for being loved does change us, but you do not have to make those changes first, to somehow think you must become Mother Teresa before God will love you. You are loved right now!

Stop and say this right now out loud:

"I am loved! God loves me! God accepts me!"

You really are, you know?

### Centering

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now.

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### Praise

Based on the reading above, list below one of the ways that you have most felt or seen God's love for you. Where or how or through whom have you felt God's love most recently? Reflect on this and give thanks throughout the day.

### People

Who do you know right now who most needs to know and feel God's love? Write their name below and at least one thing you can do or say to help them know and feel God's love.

*Person*

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*How You Can Be God's Love Today*

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### Principle

As you reflect on the reading above, what truth, theme, or principle do you feel God would have you learn this day? Remember that this truth may come to you some time throughout the day and not right now. But when it does, write it in your own words in the space below...

## **Prayer**

From all you have read and done this morning, now let your heart pour out to God.

What's on your heart and mind? End that time of prayer with your centering word or phrase, then allow a couple of moments for complete silence.



### Day 3

Reading:

#### *God Is With Us*

God is with us. That is the wondrous, profound message of the Bible. The problem is not God being with us. We do not have to beg God to be with us. God is with us. The problem is our being in tune to God, our consciousness of God's presence.

Have you ever been with someone else who didn't even seem to know you were there? Even though you were present, you were not really present to that person because he or she was too preoccupied to focus on you.

One of the greatest tragedies in life is the relationships that could have been, the friendships we missed, didn't make, didn't have time for, or the times when someone who could have really made a profound difference in our lives wanted to be our friend, wanted to be an enjoyable companion, but we would not allow them.

As I look back over my life, I realize that the most meaningful experiences in my life came out of the relationships, those special people God brought into my life. I would imagine that you could say the same.

If this is true in mere human relationships, how much more true is it of our relationship with God?

How sad and unnecessary it is to run the race, to live our lives so preoccupied with other things that we never notice that God's right there running beside us - at the starting line, the finish line and every where in between!

We are not alone. Never! Ever! No matter what the situation. No matter what the obstacles in our path or how steep the pathway. There is One who always runs beside us, wanting by the sheer awareness of his presence to encourage and strengthen us.

God is with us every second of everyday, yet how many days go by, how many miles of the race do we run without acknowledging that Presence?

Perhaps God would be more real to us if we sought God at times other than when we really had no other choice.

You see, it will be ever so much easier to know God's presence during the needy times, if we have stayed in touch through the good times, through all times.

Life has a way of forcing us to realize our need to walk with God....

I love that phrase about Enoch in the Bible. It says, "after he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God..." To be sure he walked with God before he became a father, but it is true that parenthood has driven lots of people over the centuries to seek God...

No matter how self-sufficient, intelligent or wealthy we may become, there will come responsibilities and turning points in our lives when we realize we can't make it on our own, that we need a source of strength that mere human companionship cannot provide. The good news is that God is with us, always.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now. (Remember to use it throughout the day to get back to your still point)

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### **Praise**

Based on the reading above, list below one of the ways that you have sensed God's presence with you. Or have you? Spend the day on a God hunt, that is, seeking to catch a glimpse of God, hear God's voice, for God is with you. Share that in the space below.

### **People**

Sometimes one of the ways God is with us is through others. Is there someone in your life through whom you have felt God's presence and love? Share that person's name below and then, if possible, call, email, write or visit that person to let them know what they mean to you. Or, consider someone you know through whom God's presence and love can come through to them through you. Make contact with that person in some way this day, if only to let them know you were thinking about them.

### **Principle**

What truth, theme, or principle do you feel God is reminding you of or teaching you today? Reflect on the difference that can make in your life if you truly believe it.

## **Prayer**

Now just imagine that God is right there with you, sitting in a chair beside. What would you say to God?

## Day 4

Reading:

### *Talk With God*

If we are to walk with God, then we must talk with God.

How can you get close or stay close to anyone without communicating with them?

I like the way Brother Lawrence defines prayer - "practicing the presence of God." I believe that's what the Apostle Paul in the Bible means when he tells us to "pray without ceasing."

Brother Lawrence and Paul are not talking about staying on your knees with your hands piously folded together 24 hours a day. They are talking about an attitude, an inner consciousness. They are encouraging us to always be in touch with God, open to and aware of God's presence with us, to instinctively seek God's presence and will in all things.

One of my favorite movies is *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye, a Russian Jew, is the main character. From the beginning to the end of the film, Tevye talks to God, lots of times the topic was his five daughters who do not seem to value tradition as much as he does. When he's walking down the road selling milk, or feeding his cows in the barn, whether he's feeling joy or sorrow, he talks with God.

Tevye walked with God. He took God seriously. He dared to believe that God was with him and cared about him, even if God's presence and care were not always apparent to him.

But you do not know how to talk with God?

If you have not done so already, look at Appendix C & D in this book. There are two simple models there for you to use in learning how to pray. One is based on the five fingers of your hand. The other model, more in depth, is based on the prayer we know as "The Lord's

Prayer," that is, the one Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray. Use one or both of these. Even if you and God have chatted for a long time, use those models any way, for they can enhance your talks with God.

Here's something else that might help you...

There are many different kinds of prayer.

There's the praise prayer. This is simply a prayer to adore God, to say to God how much you love God.

There's a thanksgiving prayer. In it you name that for which you are grateful, acknowledging that all your blessings come from God.

Confession is also a form of prayer. In it you confide openly and honestly to God any burdens on your heart, anything that you feel is coming between you and God, things said or done, things left unsaid or done. This prayer is seeking forgiveness.

Intercession is a kind of prayer with names in it. You are coming to God not on your behalf but for others.

Petition is prayer in which you ask God for that which you feel you need.

Meditation is also a kind of prayer. One form of mediation is what you do each day in the Morning Manna Diet when you choose a word or phrase on which to center. It is a way of clearing and focusing your mind on God.

There's a prayer that has no words at all. It's simply practicing silence. This can be one of the best kinds of prayer as it helps you open your spiritual senses to the voice and presence of God. Prayer is not always our talking, but often also our listening.

Dedication is another kind of prayer. It is the offering of ourselves to be God's servants, to submit to God's good will for us, knowing that God does have our good in mind. Jesus prayed

such a prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, "Father, let this cup pass from me," (referring to the cross ahead of him), "but nevertheless, thy will, not mine, be done."

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Praise God today for the gift of prayer. Realize that prayer is the best cell phone in the whole world. There's always a signal. God's line is never busy. God always hears, wherever, whenever, whatever. That's is reason for praise, is it not?

### **People**

One of the forms of prayer is intercession. Who is on your heart and mind this day? Share a prayer right now for that person. As others come to mind throughout the day, pray for them as well.

### **Principle**

Is there something in the reading today that stood out to you? Perhaps one of the forms of prayer. Use the day to reflect on that and begin using it. You might wish to jot down your thoughts in the space below.

## **Prayer**

If a prayer form stood out to you, then use it right now. End that time by going back to your centering word or phrase for a couple of minutes.



## Day 5

Reading:

### *Walk With Those Who Walk With God*

One of the things I have learned in my walk with God is that the closer I walk with God, the closer I get to others. You walk with God and before long you notice that there are other companions also walking with you. And they in turn help you in your own walk with God.

If you would walk with God, talk with God. But also seek out and walk with those who walk with God. Make them "most enjoyable companions," too.

Seek out companions who know God as their most enjoyable companion. Find your own Enoch or Noah, or Moses, or Ruth, persons who walk with God and can help you in your walk with God. They are there...in your family, church, school, where you work.

Make friends with the Christians over the centuries who have walked with God. Persons like John and Charles Wesley, Martin Luther, and countless others. Study the lives and read the writings of Thomas a Kempis, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Augustine and the many others who have much still to teach us about how to walk with God. I love to read the writings and biographies of such saints as St. Francis of Assisi, whose life of simplicity and love of God and neighbor has much to teach us. (See Appendix for a list of some of the spiritual classics I have found most helpful in my walk with God and would recommend to you).

But all of this is especially true of Jesus. Walk with him by reading his teachings in the Gospels of the New Testament, and very soon you will find yourself feeling very much closer to God. If you have never read any of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, start with one of them, say Matthew, and read it through all in one sitting. Read it again, some each day for greater reflection.

Part of what this means is that it's not enough for a meaningful spiritual life to concentrate on just ourselves and our alone time with God. We also need community, friends, companions. That means making a group of people, a church or faith community an important part of our lives. When we meet, worship, pray, study, and service with others, there is a great nourishment and strength that come into our lives. We help, support, teach, even correct and guide one another as we all walk with God. I only know that I would not be who I am, where I am without this great circle of friends who have accepted, embraced, taught, and loved me my whole life and always will. I need them, always, and they need me. Somehow in our communion with one another we find our communion with God deepened as well.

Friends change. We change. Friendships can end. But our friendship with God will never end. God will be our most enjoyable companion for eternity. Our walk with God never ends.

It's like a little girl who was telling the story of Enoch in her own way. She said, "Enoch and God used to take long walks together. And one day they walked further than usual and God said, 'Enoch, you must be tired; come into my house and rest.'"

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Call to mind today and give thanks and praise for someone who has helped you feel closer to God.

### **People**

Reflect on your life and relationships. Have you met someone lately or know of someone who you feel you could help in their walk with God? Who is that person? What's one thing you could do to render spiritual guidance and help to him or her?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, be on the lookout today for how God might deepen your understanding of this truth so that you can begin applying it today, or for some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you.

### **Prayer**

In your prayer now and throughout the day, lift up to God those persons God has used to bless and help others in their spiritual journeys. Seek also God's help and direction for you to be such a person.

## Day 6

Reading:

### *Relationships Need Renewal*

I remember when my son was about four years old. He saw my wedding ring on my finger and asked me about it. I think he was also wondering why he didn't have one. So I got down our wedding album and showed him the pictures from our wedding day. One of those pictures is a close up of our hands, side by side, wearing those wedding rings. I told him this was something that people wore when they got married to help them remember the special promises they made to each other - like to love, honor, cherish, respect, be faithful...

In every wedding ceremony I perform I always say something like this in regard to the rings:

“Wedding rings are very special. They are a visible symbol of your love and your commitment. Today you will wear them for the first time as husband and wife. Each day after this when you see them, let them remind you of the promises you have made each other before God. And each time you see them, renew those promises in your heart. For one of the secrets of a good marriage is falling in love each day.”

When you think about it, all relationships are like this. They need constant attention and renewal.

A friend told me once, “Every day is my wedding day.” I really didn't understand what he meant at the time but now I do. You do not just become husband and wife on a certain day. You must also choose every day to be husband and wife, to love, cherish, honor, respect - for life has a way of trying to pull you apart. You need to be able to re-say those vows, to reaffirm them in words and deeds each day.

You did not just become a parent on the day your child was born, but choose each day to be recommitted to that child, to love, protect, guide as a parent.

Friendships are the same way. They can get worn, tested. They need constant renewal and recommitment.

To me this is the real test of love - not just saying one day, "I love you, I will be committed to you, You are my friend," but saying that and showing that each and every day!

Relationships need constant attention, constant renewal if they are to thrive and be the blessings God created them to be.

I watched my wife each morning go about the house tending to her various plants. She waters them, opens the blinds on the windows so that the sunlight can come in for them, and I even hear her talking to them from time to time. They also need special soil which she provides. Those plants need regular attention if they are to stay health and grow.

Our relationships are the same way. They need communication, love, nurturing each and every day if they are to stay healthy and grow strong.

Have you ever seen plants that had not received the kind of attention they needed like this one (show a plant that's obviously been neglected)? The soil dries out. The leaves wither. The plant, if unattended long enough, can die.

I have seen so many relationships the same way. Neglect to do the little things each day that renew and strengthen them, and before long they begin to wither too. You can't just plant them and leave them alone, can you? They need care each day.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Call to mind today and give thanks and praise for someone who has helped you feel closer to God.

### **People**

Reflect on your life and relationships. Have you met someone lately or know of someone who you feel you could help in their walk with God? Who is that person? What's one thing you could do to render spiritual guidance and help to him or her?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, be on the lookout today for how God might deepen your understanding of this truth so that you can begin applying it today, or for some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you.

## **Prayer**

In your prayer now and throughout the day, lift up to God those persons God has used to bless and help others in their spiritual journeys. Seek also God's help and direction for you to be such a person.

## Day 7

Reading:

### *Our Relationship With God Needs Renewal, Too*

Everything that was shared about relationships in the reading yesterday is also true in our relationship with God.

Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer in the 16th century, said of baptism that it is something we do in church one day but takes the rest of our lives to complete. Our relationship with God is a dynamic, growing communion that we are forever renewing and recommitting ourselves to.

Perhaps you have noticed that often when there is a baptism in a worship service everyone renews their baptismal vows. Why? Because we, too, need to be reminded of who we are and whose we are. That relationship with God needs renewal. Being a person of faith is not just something that happened to us sometime ago but someone we are, we choose to be each and everyday.

In Joshua 24 in the Bible (which you may wish to read now or some time today) we see that after they had settled in the promised land Joshua called the people together and said to them, "Choose this day whom you will serve." And he set an example for them by reaffirming his choice of God for him and his family. And they followed that example, at least for that day. As we read the rest of the story into the Book of Judges, we see that they failed to continue making that choice.

Choosing to love and serve God is not something we do one day. It really should be the first thing we say each day and throughout the day: "I choose to serve God this day, this hour!"



“Choose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

That should be written on places where we will see it everyday - on the frig, on our desk at work, on the dashboard of our car, as the screen saver on our computers...

We had a plant once that we had neglected for a long time. It looked dead. When we finally find it again, it looked dead. But we began to water it, to put it in the sunlight, to provide nutrients for it and before long it began to come back to life. Maybe you feel that your relationship with God is like that dead plant - no hope of every be healthy and alive again. But your relationship with God can be renewed, can have new life again. For God loves you. God never stopped loving you. So start again right now loving God back. Choose to serve God again this day, and the next, and the next...and before long you will see new life growing inside you, too.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

---

### **Praise**

Call to mind today and give thanks and praise for someone who has helped you feel closer to God.

### **People**

Reflect on your life and relationships. Have you met someone lately or know of someone who you feel you could help in their walk with God? Who is that person? What's one thing you could do to render spiritual guidance and help to him or her?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, be on the lookout today for how God might deepen your understanding of this truth so that you can begin applying it today, or for some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you.

### **Prayer**

In your prayer now and throughout the day, lift up to God those persons God has used to bless and help others in their spiritual journeys. Seek also God's help and direction for you to be such a person.

## Day 8

Reading:

### *Until You Bless Me - Part 1*

One of the most interesting characters in the Bible is Jacob, though there's not a lot about him you can find to admire, at least at first unless it's being a cunning, tricky, selfish manipulator (to read about him read chapters 25 - 35 in Genesis). But after reading about his wrestling match with God in Genesis 32:22-31, I found myself admiring something about Jacob - his tenacity, his persistence, his unwillingness to give up.

A lot of things came together that night before he was to meet his estranged brother, Esau. He was in the fight of his life and that struggle was with God, with who Jacob was, and who he would be. Jacob had hold of God, as a wrestler would in a match, and would not let go. "I will not let you go until you bless me," he says, even after he is seriously hurt, as wrestling can do. Nonetheless, he would not give up or let go. And he was blessed. He became a new person with a new destiny. He reminds me of another person I admire - the persistent widow in the parable Jesus told who would not give up until that corrupt judge did right by her (see The Gospel of Luke 18:1-8). Our next few readings will reflect on her life.

There is a vital lesson here for us...

Often we miss great blessings because we give up too soon...

You ever start a diet and give up before too long, before the blessings started?

I taught in college and I saw how students would take classes they really needed and wanted to take but would give up and drop out when it got to be a struggle. They gave up before the blessings started, before it all began to make sense for them, before they began to learn something and see that they could master it.

What blessings he and all of us would have missed out on if Thomas Edison had given up after the hundreds and thousands of failed experiments!

If you are a quitter, if you give up every time things get to be struggle, you will never accomplish very much in your life and miss out on tremendous blessings. For life is a struggle sometimes. I don't know why, just that each day you can expect to be challenged to a wrestling match.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Call to mind today and give thanks and praise for someone who has helped you feel closer to God.

### **People**

Reflect on your life and relationships. Have you met someone lately or know of someone who you feel you could help in their walk with God? Who is that person? What's one thing you could do to render spiritual guidance and help to him or her?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, be on the lookout today for how God might deepen your understanding of this truth so that you can begin applying it today, or for some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you.

### **Prayer**

In your prayer now and throughout the day, lift up to God those persons God has used to bless and help others in their spiritual journeys. Seek also God's help and direction for you to be such a person.

## Day 9

Reading:

### *Until You Bless Me - Part 2*

Yesterday we looked at how we can sometimes give up in our lives when a struggle comes along before the blessings come. Well, relationships can be that way, too. Many people give up too soon on relationships - like marriage. I have a comic strip set in a lawyer's office. They say they want a divorce. The lawyer looks at them and says, "I'm not sure you are giving your marriage a fair chance." You see, they are still in their wedding clothes! You can't give up when the going gets a little tough, when it becomes a real struggle. Every marriage and every relationship goes through struggles sometimes. If we stick it out, hold on, hang in and keep loving and talking and struggling, often some very real blessings can come to us. Through that struggle we can actually come to understand one another better and become closer. And I do not mean this is always true for every marriage, for some are broken or mismatched or abusive beyond any repair. I just hate to see couples, though, give up too soon on each other, for I know from my own experience that there are blessings bestowed through struggles.

Some blessings come only after much struggle, great and strenuous wrestling and perhaps even some wounds, but so few of us ever receive them because we give up, we yield before the blessings come...

THE BIBLE. How many persons have started reading the Bible, knowing they needed to, but found it a struggle to do, hard to understand, so they gave up before they were blessed by the struggle?

PRAYER. It's the same with prayer. Prayer can be a real wrestling match, taking much out of us, but what blessings it can bestow in peace, strength, closeness to God if we do not give up too soon.

WORSHIP. Many feel the need for worship and begin coming to church, but all too soon they fall back into the old habits, it's too much of a struggle getting up and dressing and getting the children to church. They give up before the blessings are bestowed - a sense of God's presence, renewal for living, peace, and wondrous fellowship with God's people.

GIVING. And what of giving? We know we are called to give of our time and money and talents. This can be a real struggle, this giving. But if we do not quit, we discover the truth of what Jesus taught - it is more blessed to give than to receive. There are tremendous blessings that come from giving, really giving of ourselves.

I do not know how or where God's calling you to come out and take on a wrestling match (for too many of us are still sitting as spectators in the stands). But I do know this - take God on and don't let go before the blessings come...and they will come...

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

---

### **Praise**

Call to mind today and give thanks and praise for someone who has helped you feel closer to God.

### **People**

Reflect on your life and relationships. Have you met someone lately or know of someone who you feel you could help in their walk with God? Who is that person? What's one thing you could do to render spiritual guidance and help to him or her?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, be on the lookout today for how God might deepen your understanding of this truth so that you can begin applying it today, or for some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you.

### **Prayer**

In your prayer now and throughout the day, lift up to God those persons God has used to bless and help others in their spiritual journeys. Seek also God's help and direction for you to be such a person.



## Day 10

Reading:

### *Don't Give Up - Part 1*

The reading for the last couple of days on not giving up, reminded me of one of my favorite stories Jesus told - the persistent widow in The Gospel of Luke 18:1-18. If you haven't read that, do so, as the readings for the next several days are based on it.

Do you ever just want to give up? Throw up your arms? Surrender? Quit? Call it a day? Call it a life? I don't know about you, but that's a constant temptation for me, especially when things get a little tough. What's that old saying...when the going gets tough, the tough get going? Yeah, tough times really tempt me to get going... in another direction or to the sideline to sit them out.

There was a popular TV show on years ago - Hee Haw. Each show one segment had the saddest looking bunch of folks you've ever seen singing this song:

*Gloom, despair, and agony on me,*

*Deep dark depression, excessive misery;*

*if it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all.*

*Gloom, despair, and agony on me.*

Well, who hasn't sung that tune from time to time, or been tempted to make it our theme song? The hero in today's story from Jesus could have rightly sung that song. She could have given up long ago. She was a widow. The word "widow" in Greek is "chera" and it means "forsaken," "empty." Whenever the Bible wishes to name the most helpless persons in a society, orphans and widows top the list. They had few rights. There was no Social Security, no welfare or Medicare. They were often exploited and abused. A more powerless person could not have

been found. Yet, Jesus makes her the hero of the story (his heroes are always surprising, aren't they?) Yes, she's a hero, a model of persistence, patience, of not giving up.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

---

### **Praise**

Call to mind today and give thanks and praise for someone who has been a hero for you.

### **People**

Who are the "forsaken ones" you know, the persons who seem to be powerless, helpless, at the mercy of the whole world? How might you be of some comfort and help to at least one of them this day?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Look for ways that this truth might be just what you need this day.

## **Prayer**

Pour your heart out to God, especially if you feel like giving up. tell God how you feel. Then move from yourself to others you know who are close to giving up if not already there. Seek God's help on their behalf and offer yourself as an instrument of God's encouragement and help.

## Day 11

Reading:

### *Don't Give Up - Part 2*

Don't give up on yourself.

This widow in Luke 18 didn't give up on herself. She had ever reason to do so.

Everything was against her. She had nothing. What little she had had been taken from her. She couldn't afford a high priced, powerful lawyer to represent her. Even the legal system itself was stacked against her. No power, No status. A nobody to most everybody. But not to herself! She refused to sit down and sing that old Hee Haw tune. She would not take on the role of victim, of woe is me.

To the contrary, she had a sense of dignity, of worth. Her voice was tiny, but she raised it anyway. Her power was small, but she used what she had. Maybe everyone else had given up on her, if they noticed her at all, but she had not given up. Never! Ever!

It really hurts when we get the message from others that we are nobodies, that we don't matter, that we are losers. That's a terrible burden to bear. But we can bear that as long as we do not say to ourselves, "They're right. You are a loser. Give up." When we say that and mean that, then we are in a world of trouble. And that's how many people do see themselves or are made to see themselves. They've lost so many times, failed at one thing after another, been knocked down just once too often and just don't want to get up again.

Norman Vincent Peale once traveled to Hong Kong. He passed a tattoo shop. On the shop window were various examples - a flag, dagger, slogans. One caught his eye: "Born to Lose." He was curious and went inside to ask about it. "Do people really ask for that tattoo?" he asked. "Yes," the man replied. Someone had just asked for it, in fact. "Why would anyone want to be

branded with that?" Peale asked. The old man shrugged and said, "Before tattoo on chest, tattoo already on mind."

We all fail sometimes. We all lose sometimes. We can fall flat on our faces and sometimes because someone else tripped us. Life is not fair sometimes. But we do not have to stay down. We do not have to give up. God does not give up on us. Others may. God never does. And frankly, that's what keeps me going more often than not - knowing that the great and good Creator of all loves me, values me, never gives up on me. Let that be tattooed on your mind and heart, my friend.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Look in the mirror this morning. Take a good look at yourself. Give praise and thanks today for yourself, for you. For you are God's unique and precious gift.

### **People**

Pray today and reach out to someone you know who is wearing that tattoo on their heart, who is branded by self as of no worth.

### Principle

The principle for this day might well be, "Don't give up on yourself." Say that right now - "I will not give up on myself this or any day." God hasn't given up on you. Why should you? Look out for situations and circumstances today that will make you want to give up on or think of yourself with undue harshness. When they arise, say, "God hasn't given up on me, and I will not give up on me."

### Prayer

Use this prayer throughout the day:

*Loving God, you made me. You know me better than anyone. You know my past. You know my thoughts. Yet, you love me. You do not give up on me. Help me to not give up on myself. Help me, yes, to be realistic about my faults and failures, but to not allow them to be all I see. help me see what you see when you look at me - a person of sacred worth. And let me live in all the joy and blessing of all that this means. Amen.*

## Day 12

Reading:

### *Don't Give Up - Part 3*

Don't give up on others.

This widow did not give up on herself. Neither would she give up on that judge, as unfeeling and corrupt as he was. She was not going to stop pestering him until he did the right thing by her. She believed he would, if only to get rid of her.

It's easy to give up on ourselves. Maybe it's easier even to give up on others, to cast them into the losers slot, the widows, the nobodies who will never amount to anything. Or maybe it's someone close to us, maybe even in our own family, who has caused us so much grief and pain, though we have tried and tried with them. The very great temptation is to wash our hands, Pilate-like, to rid ourselves, our thoughts of them. Give up on them.

Maybe I do not know very much about being a Christian, but one thing I think I really understand - nobody's a loser, that nobody's a nobody in the eyes of God. Every person is made in God's image and is of infinite worth, even the most lowly, even the outcasts, the hated of any society. Many of the persons Jesus called to follow him were such persons: fisherman, tax collectors, sinners. And these were the very people he spent most of his time ministering to... lepers, lame, demon-possessed, those nobodies that society had cast out, given up on, who had given up on themselves. But not Jesus! And even when his followers gave up on him, deserting him, he never gave up on them. He kept on loving them, believing in them, welcoming them back.

It's not easy, believe me, I know. People let you down, don't they, even people close to you? They hurt you. They don't do right by you. They do things you just don't understand. But so

do you. So do I. We don't want anyone giving up on us, do we? Let's not give up on anyone else, either. Never stop loving. Never give up. Indeed, when others are hardest to love, when they try our patience the most, then is precisely when they need it the most.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

---

### **Praise**

Let the name or face of someone come to mind in your past or present who refused to give up on you. Give thanks and praise for that person today.

### **People**

Who is someone you have been tempted to give up on recently or perhaps already have?  
How might you change your attitude? How might your attitude and actions help that person?  
How can you show you believe in him/her?



### **Principle**

"Don't give up on others" might be the truth God's trying to really get across to you today. Look at relationships and situations today in which you might apply this principle.

### **Prayer**

As you think about yesterday and the day ahead, what's on your heart and mind right now? Share those things right now with God, just as you would your very best friend. Then end this time with a couple of minutes using your centering word or phrase.

### Day 13

Reading:

#### *Don't Give Up - Part 4*

Don't give up on God.

This widow did not give up on herself, on that judge, or on God. Maybe that's why she didn't give up on herself or that judge. She had reason to. She had obviously suffered a great deal of injustice through the corrupt legal system, but also by losing her husband. She could have easily laid all of that at God's feet, blaming and cursing God for her lot in life. (Some in those days believed that if a husband died it was because he sinned or his wife sinned, so this was the punishment. Imagine living with the grief and with such views from your community?)

But not this woman. She did not see it this way. She had faith that God cared for her and knew her plight, and that some time, some how God would come through for her. She would not give up on God.

You know, I wonder if Jesus himself was not tempted to give up on God sometimes? Can you imagine being betrayed, arrested, beaten, judged, condemned, crucified? I would be saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," too? Yet, even in that cry he calls in faith upon God! And in the garden when he submitted to drinking that bitter cup, he entrusted his life into God's hands. Jesus believed that somehow even his death could be used by God to accomplish God's purpose. He would not give up on God, even on a cross. Now that's faith, my friends.

Maybe some of us are at the point in which we are thinking about giving up on God. Maybe some of us already have. Maybe our prayers have seemingly gone unanswered for too long now...

Perhaps the tough times just seem to keep getting tougher, and God doesn't seem to know or care...

Maybe life's threatening to crucify us too... We are tempted to take the advice of Job's wife, "Curse God and die!"

But don't give up on God! When life is unfair, keep on trusting. Though you hear or see no result, keep on praying. Keep on believing! God does hear. God does know. God will act in a time and way that's best for us. For God is nothing like that corrupt judge. Even that rascal could be convinced to do the right thing. How much more, Jesus is saying, will God do justly by us? For God wishes to help us. Such faith is what the Son of man longs to see when he visit us, when he turns his eyes upon our souls.

The words of Winston Churchill, delivered, I believe, at a commencement service, come to mind (a man who knew the powerful temptation to give up and give in under the most trying of times): "Do not give up. Do not ever give up. Never give up!"

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

As you reflect on yesterday, what is something for which you would like to give thanks and praise to God right now? Do so. Tell God how you feel. Whenever you think of that blessing throughout this new day, say a word of thanks.

### **People**

Today you will probably encounter persons who have given up on God, themselves, maybe everything. Listen for them. Watch for them. Find ways that you can help give them some new hope, even if it's only to say, "I really care about you and I'm here for you if you need someone just to listen. And I'm praying for you, too."

### **Principle**

The principle today from the reading is, "Don't give up on God." How do you most need to apply and use that truth in your life right now? Be on the lookout for how you can use it this very day.

### **Prayer**

In your prayer time today, honestly confess to God any times when you felt like giving up on God. Seek the gift of patience and trust, knowing that God is absolutely dependable. Then use your centering word or phrase for a few moments.

## *Day 14*

Reading:

### *The Charred Desk*

(Read Ezekiel 37:1-14 in the Bible)

My father was a skilled carpenter. During the last years of his life, he worked in historical restoration in New Bern, North Carolina. Much of his work involved the repair and restoration of various historic sites. It was something he took a great deal of joy and pride in doing.

He had a workshop at home, and sometimes people would bring him furniture and other items to be restored. I remember an older lady bringing my father a piece of furniture that, to me, looked like a worthless wooden desk. I listened as she explained through tears how it had received water and burn damage as the result of a fire. She told him how much it meant to her and how long it had been in her family. "Can you restore it?" she pleaded. My father carefully looked over the desk and then replied, "I will do my best." Weeks passed. He spent each night out there in his shop working on that charred desk. It seemed a lost cause to me. But I remember the day the lady came back for it. I do not know how he did it, but my father restored that desk. The woman was thrilled. I was happy for her and proud of my father.

I think of this story often and always gather encouragement from it. As a minister I have been called in often to help bring some restoration to fragile and damaged lives. Many times I have wished it was just a piece of burned wood that needed repair. But no, it was a human being or a family or a church or a community. And I have been there myself; and I have seen and experienced the presence of another and far greater master carpenter. I have seen God bring new hope, new life, healing, and restoration into my own life and into the lives of others. It is true that I have not seen what I would consider restoration in every situation. But I have seen enough to

know that it does happen and that we must never lose faith or hope; we must never underestimate God's power and grace.

The Bible reading mentioned above is from what is probably the best-known passage in the Book of Ezekiel - the story of the valley of dry bones. It has inspired great art (paintings and songs) as well as individuals and whole communities with its stirring message of hope and trust in God in the midst of utter despair. Its message is clear: That which we see as being impossible is possible for God. Where there seems no hope for life, no restoration, with God all of that can happen.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give praise and thanks today for how you have experienced and seen the restorative power of God.

### **People**

Who are some human charred desks in your family, workplace, community? Take some time now to think about them, to bring them to God in prayer. Seek how you might be an instrument of God's restoration for them.

### **Principle**

The truth in the above reading is this - *No matter how desperate or hopeless the situation, there is always hope and possibilities with God.* Chances are you are going to need this principle today or soon. At the end of the day, come back to this space and record what you learned about it or how you applied it today.

### **Prayer**

As you pray today, uncover those charred portions of your life, your mind, your heart, your past...lay them bare before God. Trust the healing, restorative power of God to touch each one. Then end this time by using your centering word or phrase.

**Day 15**

Reading:

***How Majestic!***

Read Psalm 8.

Key Verse for the Day: To the chief Musician upon Gittith, A Psalm of David. O LORD our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.

Psalm 8:1)

The Psalms were songs sung in the temple. Often there were instructions given as to who was to lead them, how each song was to be sung, with what instruments, and even to what tune. You may wish to look through the Psalms at some of these headings and instructions. They are quite interesting. And you can see that Psalm 8 has such instructions (the first part of the verse). It is not clear exactly who is in kind here and what instructions are given.

The Psalmist sings out that God's greatness is seen in all the earth. Just look around you. The whole earth is full of God's creative glory and power. And nowhere is this seen than in the night sky (see verse 3).

I was amazed watching a skilled carpenter build a cabinet for our church office. He used at least a dozen tools. It took him a week to finish. I remember thinking what a marvelous creative power God has given us. Think for a moment about the time, skill, knowledge, and power required to make things. Think of the effort required to build a house, a sky scraper, a car, a spaceship.... Such creations show the intelligence and greatness of human beings. But no person has ever created a planet! No one has made a mountain range! Who has made an ocean or a star or even a tree? Can you imagine the power it must have taken to create just one star? Psalm 8 (also see Psalm 104) is a hymn of praise to God as Creator. The Psalmist looks at the earth and



sees everywhere the greatness and goodness of God. The Psalmist stands in awe before the Creator and gives thanks for the bounty of God's creation.

It's so easy to take God's creation and providence for granted. Every sunrise, each time we turn on the water faucet, every meal, the clothes we wear, the houses that provide shelter, each breath, even this ink and paper come from God's good earth. Our dependence upon God and God's creation is total!

### **Centering**

Read psalm 8 again. Pick your centering word or phrase from it today. Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

As you look around you today, what part of creation reveals to you the awe and majestic of God for which you wish to give thanks and praise?

### **People**

How have you seen God's majesty and greatness in others? Look for that today.

### **Principle**

Reflecting on Psalm 8 and the reading based on it, what's some truth, some principle you see? Be alert for how you might need it today.

### **Prayer**

For your prayer today, name everything that comes to mind that reveals to you the majesty and glory of God. Give thanks for them all. Let your prayer be a stream of unending adoration and awe at the greatness of God. Then use your centering word or phrase for a couple of moments.

**Day 16**

Reading:

***Sing Praises***

Read Psalm 146.

Key Verse: I will sing praises to my God all my life long (Psalm 146:1b)

For as long as I can remember, I have loved music. I love to sing. I took piano lessons (wasn't very good) but it did teach me the notes and that has helped me in many ways to enjoy and use music. Music is my favorite part of worship. I cannot imagine worship or my life without the sound of music.

My Christian pilgrimage began really with singing praises. I grew up in a small village on the banks of the Neuse River in North Carolina. There was a church there that had a youth choir. I was invited to be part of it and the music hooked me from that moment on (being hooked is a serious thing for someone named "Bass").

I cannot help but think about the movie, "Sister Act." Whoopie Goldberg plays a character hiding from some bad guys. She's disguised as a nun in a convent. She gets involved with the choir there that really needs help. In the process she and the whole convent and eventually the community discovers the power of singing God's praises with joy and vigor. I know others may think otherwise, but that movie was the most positive thing I have seen lately from Hollywood about the church.

It's true that so much of the singing I see on TV and even in churches is too much show and not enough sincere praise. I have a comic strip in which a singer is in church holding a microphone and says, "I really don't like this song but it's a good showcase for my voice."

Singing can become just an ego trip or way to prey upon the emotions of people. It is a powerful tool. Is there any good gift from God that cannot be abused?

But music, singing, when it comes from the heart, no matter if it is contemporary or the most traditional hymn, helps us to praise God, to render thanks and worship to the One who made us. So, “I will sing praises to my God all my life long.”

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks today for the gift of music. What hymn or song of praise comes to mind today? Sing or hum it throughout the day, even if you have to do it silently. For a “song of praise is fitting” (Ps 147:1b).

### **People**

Remember, give thanks and say a prayer for musicians, singers, and composers. They are also God's gifts to us. Maybe you could send one a note of appreciation, especially your choir director or choir in your church or place of worship.

### **Principle**

What's the principle or truth you feel God would teach you today? It might be in the above reading about music and singing God's praises. Or, it could come to you some time today. When it does, record it here and how you might need or use it in your life.

### **Prayer**

Use this prayer throughout the day:

*Lord, you are the Great Singer, you are the music. You give it to us as a gift that we ight give it back to you in joyous praise. You love to hear songs of praise. Indeed, each moment of our lives should be filled with singing your praises. Let the music come, Lord, from genuine love of you, from a heart filled with thanksgiving and only to bring you glory. Amen.*

**Day 17**

Reading:

***This Is the Day***

*This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (Psalm 118:24).*

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings sorrow or joy, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings pain or pleasure, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings rest or work, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings disappointment or contentment, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings storms or sunshine, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings enemies or friends, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings turmoil or peace, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings failure or success, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...

If it brings complaint or praise, I will rejoice in it.

This is the day the Lord has made...  
If it brings life or death, I will rejoice in it,  
for it is the day the Lord has made. It is a gift to me.  
So let me rejoice!

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Time itself is one of God's greatest gifts. Indeed, could we enjoy any of the other gifts without it? So give praise and thanks today for today and for every sunrise God gives you.

### **People**

As you begin another day, who is on your heart? How might you use a portion of it to bring some added joy and meaning to that person?

### **Principle**

The key teaching for today is that each second of each day is a gift from God to be cherished and received with joy. How might this attitude toward time help you today?

### **Prayer**

*Giving God, time is one of your most precious gifts to me. How I take it for granted. Help me cherish each moment, rejoicing in the life you give me. Amen.*



## Day 18

Reading:

### *I Wonder As I Wander*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established...(Psalm 8: 3)*

I have on my wall a replica of the *Starry Night* by Van Gogh. It's my favorite painting. Why? Because that's what I see too when I gaze into a starry night. And that's one of my favorite things to do - just stand out in the dark and watch the most magnificent show in the universe playing right now above us all. But because we see it only at night, that's one reason why I have *The Starry Night* on my wall - to constantly see it and constantly in awe.

I remember when my son, Michael, was just a wee lad. One night we were standing outside gazing in awe at the starry host above us. Michael, standing beside me, asked, "Daddy, why did God create the stars?"

I thought about that question for a few moments. I knew the scientific or practical reason for stars. After all, our sun is a star. Without it there would be no life. But even that did not seem like an adequate explanation.

As I stood there, it came to me that perhaps God made the stars so that we would ask questions like, "Why?" and "Who?" So that we would wonder as we wander, and be led in it to the One who created all things, who loves us more than we can know.

We are made to wonder as we wander. Wonder is such a wonderful thing, a very human thing. It is something we should celebrate, enjoy, and embrace as part of the Creator's good will for our lives.

Wonder is surely one of the first experiences we have in this life. We are born and look up and out in wonder and awe at this strange new world around us; at the figures smiling down at us, taking care of our every need. And then everyday of our lives is spent in wonder and awe as we see more and more, learn more and more.

We have a little girl in our church, only about 18 months now, but she is held in the arms of her father during our worship service. You have seen her, Kim and Alan's little girl. And have you noticed her face? Her eyes? She has this look of wonder at everything she sees and hears. Most children do. God help us if we ever out grow it!

One of the first books I read was "Alice in Wonderland." Have you read it? What a great book. It isn't just about a little girl and her imagination, it's about all of us. We are all an Alice and the whole world is a wonderland!

You have heard of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World? Things like the Great Pyramid of Giza, or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. But oh, my friends, there are far more wonders than 7. There are billions and billions of wonders in this world. Wonders are everywhere...from the tiniest atom to the largest sun. The universe is a wonderland! To live is to be in constant wonder...and that is a good thing, a very good thing...it is the way we were created by our Maker.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

As you look around you today, perhaps at nature or human life, what are some things that are so wonderful that they are beyond your understanding? Tonight, take a long gaze into the starry heaven and let it make you wonder... and soon you will be wondering about the One who could create such wonders. You may wish to record below some of your thoughts and impressions...

### **People**

Watch little children today. They have this awesome capacity for wonder. We can learn much from them about not taking for granted the wonders of God all around us.

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, be on the lookout today for how God might deepen your understanding of this truth so that you can begin applying it today, or for some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you.

## Prayer

*Lord, when we truly take time to notice the wonders around us, we begin to wonder about you and about ourselves. Sometimes we do feel like tiny nameless creations on a tiny blue marble in this vast universe. Yet we know to you we are never nameless, not a one of us. To you we matter, each of us. And that, too, is a wonder to us. Amen.*

## Day 19

Reading:

### *Mystery Leads Us to Wonder*

You see, we wonder because we live in a mysterious universe. There is mystery all around us, things we do not understand and never will fully.

I saw a movie not long ago called, "Shakespeare in Love." One of the characters used a phrase throughout it when the situation looked dire. It was, "I don't know. It's a mystery." Indeed, much of life is just that.

I would suggest to you that the most meaningful experiences in our lives have this mystery about them that forever leaves us in wonder and awe, that keeps life interesting, fresh, and exciting.

The wise teacher in the Proverbs knew this. He was always making a list of things he did not understand, that caused him to wonder, things right out of ordinary life:

*There are four things too mysterious for me to understand:*

*an eagle flying in the sky,*

*a snake moving on a rock,*

*a ship finding its way over the sea,*

*and a man and woman falling in love* (Proverbs 30:18-19 in Good News Bible).

What is more meaningful to us than love? Yet, it is now and always a mystery.

I have been married to my wife, for 28 years. I know her well. But she is quite often still a wondrous mystery to me. And I do not mean that in a negative sense at all. There is still a wondrous part of who she is that I am still getting to know. There is depth and mystery there that

keeps our relationship ever fresh and renewing. Of course, I'm not sure she would say the same about me! I think she has me all figured out!

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

What's some mystery for which you would give God thanks and praise this day?

### **People**

Other people are also mysteries to us, aren't they? This can be frustrating and joyous. But embracing, accepting that mystery can lead to greater understanding and intimacy. Who is the person in your life right now who is the greatest mystery to you? How might accepting that mystery help enrich your relationship?

### **Principle**

If the principle for today is, "Accept, embrace the mystery of life," what does that mean for your life? How might it help you cope with something you are facing right now? As the day progresses, how might this truth help you?

### **Prayer**

In your prayer today, give thanks for the mysteries of life. Even God, in some very real ways, is a mystery to us, the Great Mystery. Even though God has revealed so much, there is still so much more to learn. Perhaps the best use of your prayer time today is simple to sit and mediate on the mystery that is God.

## Day 20

Reading:

### *Wondering Leads to Wandering*

The mysteries of our life and world cause us to wonder and then wander, to seek, to ask questions, and that very often leads to discovery, to growth. It's the mystery of the moon and the stars that stimulates us to build mighty rockets to take us out there.

Wonder causes us to wander, to seek, to discover, just as it did for Columbus.

It is often wonder that drives scientists to new discoveries every day. Thomas Edison was a great scientist but his discoveries really grew out of a tremendous sense of curiosity and wonder.

There has been a lot of talk over the past years about this in regard to how we do education. Many believe that we need to do all we can to foster the sense of wonder and imagination in our children, allowing them then ways to wander, to explore, and to discover. To me that is an exciting way to think about and do education.

Certainly this is true for our spiritual lives. Fostering a sense of wonder and awe will result in us seeking to learn and grow in our faith. And no matter how much we learn about God, there is every so much more to learn.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a perfect example of this. The Trinity is an important teaching, it tries to do the impossible -to define God. It says that we believe in one God but in three persons - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. What a wonderful way to think about God. Yet, this God forever remains a mystery, even with out most elaborate doctrines, we cannot confine God.



One of my favorite true stories regarding attempting to "explain" the doctrine of the Trinity took place during a children's sermon. The Christian education director gathered the kids at the front of the sanctuary, as usual. She told them that Christians believe in God the three-in-one. How can something be three and also one? She produced an egg, explaining that it was one thing, an egg, but also three: shell, white & yoke.

At this point she broke the egg into a dish, only to discover it was a double-yoked egg!

Just when you think you have God all figured out, God surprises you! God brings back the wonder, the awe, for that's just who God is - a great big wonderful God we can never fully comprehend.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks and praise today for the gift of curiosity, for that capacity to wonder that leads us to wander throughout our world in search of growth, illumination, and truth. How dull life would be without it.

### **People**

Call to mind someone who nurtured the sense of wonder in your life that has helped you wander, search, and grow. Maybe a parent or teacher. Perhaps you could call or write that person to tell them thanks. Or say a prayer of thanksgiving for them. Reflect also today on how you might nurture this in others about you, at home, at church, on the job.

### **Principle**

Today's truth is that wondering leads us to wandering, to seeking, to asking. When we do those things, chances are we learn, we grow. There will arise times throughout this day that cause you to wonder. Pick up on that sense and wander, follow it to some new understanding or insight. Record below at the end of the day what you found in your wandering.

### **Prayer**

*God, you are always seeking to help us grow. This is one reason why you give us the gift of wonder, that we might wander, seek and find new truth, but most of all that we might find you. Help me to nurture this in my own soul and not suppress it in others this and every day. I am excited about the discoveries you have ahead for me. Amen.*

**Day 21**

Reading:

***The Steps***

I said, "I am falling"; but your constant love, O Lord, held me up (Psalm 94:18).

I will never forget one Sunday after the worship service. I was standing out in the churchyard. My daughter, only three years old at the time, was holding onto my hand as I was talking with someone. Suddenly she let go and I did not realize it for a moment. After only what seemed like a few seconds, I missed her. I turned and she had climbed up the steep set of steps in front of the church (they were very high). I lost my breath for a moment. She saw me and started coming down the steps. I tried to tell her not to do that without alarming her, but she kept coming down. I rushed toward her, moving faster than I ever thought I could. I saw her begin to fall headfirst down toward the steps...

Somehow I managed to catch her tiny face in both hands only inches away from the steps. I shudder to think how badly she would have been hurt had I not caught her. I sat on the steps, breathless, and she sat in my lap giggling. She thought it was a game and wanted to play again! That was not the first time I had to catch her, to help hold her up. And I was not always so fast. Sometimes she did fall. I cannot be there all the time. But my love will always be there with her.

It occurs to me that there have been so many times in my life when God has done much the same thing for me. I found myself on some steep and slippery steps, unaware of the danger, finding myself heading for a great fall, only to have God grab hold and hold me up. Yes, other times I have fallen but only to have God lift me up again. Often it was through some kind and loving friend who was there just when I needed them.

The world is a pretty scary and dangerous place. You can be on dangerous ground or steps and not even know it. That is why it makes all the difference to be able to know God walks with you and with those you love. Each day I begin with a prayer of submitting myself and my loved ones into God's loving care as we go out onto the steps...

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Remember sometime when God protected you and lifted you up. Give thanks.

### **People**

Often God's hands are our hands. God uses us, in other words, to protect, care for, and lift up those who are falling or fallen. Be on the lookout this day for them. Offer your hands to catch and hold them, offer your voice to comfort and guide them, and offer your love to care for them.

### **Principle**

From the reading today, what truth do you see that you didn't know or needed to be reminded of? Share it below and use the day in reflecting on and applying it.

### **Prayer**

*Lord, I have felt your gentle hands on my face, too, just inches before the step. How you have always been there for me, often in ways I was not even aware of, just as a parent is there for a child who cannot know or appreciate all the parent does for her. Give me wisdom, Lord, to avoid any steep steps unnecessary to climb, but faith in you when they must be ascended or descended. Whatever the day brings, you walk with me, and that makes all the difference on the journey. Amen.*

## Day 22

Reading:

### *Like a Rock*

*Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.* (Psalm 61:2b-3). See also Psalm 62:2)

One night a man was suddenly awakened by the sound of water. It was a flash flood! His house trailer was being swept away and filled with water. Somehow he managed to get out a window, only to find himself caught in the torrent. He felt for certain that he was going to die when suddenly he found himself on a large rock. He climbed as high as he could and held on there all night. In the morning when he was rescued someone asked him, “Weren’t you terrified as that water swept everything away around you?” “Well, I was at first,” he answered. But that rock just would not move.”

When the psalmist wanted to find something to represent the steadfast love, protection, and strength of God he often chose a rock. Read through the Psalms some time and see how often God is called a “rock.” That was normal for rocks surrounded the Psalmist. Might stone fortresses were built in his day and he knew their protection. God was that and much more.

This day or week or the months and years ahead may find you in some flood, some crisis, illness, danger, or need. Remember that you have a place on the Rock that is higher than you, higher than anything, and this Rock does not roll!

### Centering

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

---

### **Praise**

Think over your life to the times when you felt you were being swept away and God delivered you, set you high on a rock, and give thanks. Draw encourage from that for the floods that may still come.

### **People**

Say a prayer for those you know caught in strong currents and who wonder if they are going to perish. Find a way to remind them to look for the Rock that is higher than they are.

### **Principle**

Not matter how high the flood, there is a Rock higher. Remember that this day when the floods come your way. Below you may wish to reflect on God as a rock. What does that mean for you? How is God like a rock in your life?

**Prayer**

*Lord, there are times when I am so afraid, when I tremble, not just for myself but for others as I see them being swept away in waters of pain and tragedy. Help me to be still and know you are there for me and them, solid as a mighty rock that cannot be moved. Amen.*



## Day 23

Reading:

### *Say Grace*

*...but everything is to be received with a prayer of thanks...(1 Timothy 4:b)*

It's just a little ritual, really, but it's come to mean a great deal to me and to my family. Whenever we sit down to eat, wherever it may be, we hold hands and say grace or the blessings, that is, give thanks for the food. If we are in a public place, I sometimes see people staring at us or smiling. It is a witness, you see, to God's providential care. It is also a way of reminding us that all we have comes from God and that we should have always an attitude of gratitude. (If you are looking for some table graces, I have an ebook called, "Bread and Blessings: Table Blessings for All Occasions." May of them I wrote myself and others are some of my favorites I've collected over the years. To order your copy, go <http://www.homiliesbyemail.com> and click on the ebooks icon.)

But as I read the epistle lesson today, I realized that grace should be something I say throughout the day before receiving all the blessings God pours into my life. All of life is a gift of God's grace and reason for thanksgiving. Indeed, our whole lives are spent at the Lord's table!

Gilbert Chesterton, the great English writer (1874-1936), once wrote:

*"You say grace before meals. All right. And I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play...and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, swimming, dancing, and grace before I dip the pen in the ink..."*

Chesterton had learned something every one of us needs - to be thankful for every day blessings, to open our eyes to the numberless undeserved blessings that surround us all the time.

Yes, every second of the day should find us with our heads bowed to say the blessing.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Throughout the day, say grace over everything you do.

### **People**

Starting with your own family and when you are with others at meal time, begin saying grace or a blessing. Some examples are below under the Prayer section for today.

### **Principle**

From the scripture and reading for today, what is the main truth or principle you see in it? Put it in your own words below. How might you use it this and each day?

## Prayer

Here are some table graces from my collection:

God of goodness, bless our food.

Keep us in a cheerful mood.

Bless the cook and all who serve us.

From indigestion, Lord, preserve us. Amen.

We feel hungry, but we do not starve.

We eat until stuffed, but still have empty hearts.

So grant that our fellowship of food may become also a banquet of the Spirit, and fill us, O God, with Yourself. Amen.

Help us do the things we should,  
and to others be kind and good,  
in all we do in work or play,  
to grow more loving every day. Amen.

Bless this food to our bodies  
and us your faithful service,  
keeping us always mindful of others. Amen.

Be present at our table, Lord,

be here and everywhere adored.

Thy creatures bless and grant that we  
may live in fellowship with Thee. Amen.

Here's one without words, just motions: First, find the cook and blow a kiss toward her/him.

Then blow or throw a kiss skyward.

**Day 24**

Reading:

***Just Wait***

*My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God (Psalm 69:3b).*

Do you like to wait? I don't. I don't think most people like to wait. In fact, most of us hate to wait.

You can see it most anywhere...at stoplights, in traffic jams, in waiting lines at the grocery store...no one much likes waiting.

I saw a bumper sticker that said, "Good things come to those who..." What? Right - "wait." Well, that guy lost his bumper. Someone stole it. I'm not sure they wanted the bumper or just to get rid of that bumper sticker.

We hate to wait so much that it has led to all kinds of inventions...Microwaves, fast food, instant coffee, instant grits, instant just about everything...

I had the unpleasant experience once of being in line at a new fast food place that opened up in our small town. We thought we had at last entered the modern era. Well, there was a lady in front of me who had ordered hot dogs. Because the workers were new, things were not going as smoothly and quickly as normal. Well, this lady was steaming. When she finally got her hot dogs (who goes to Hardees for hot dogs anyway) she practically cursed out the young woman behind the counter, then stomped out to the great relief of everyone. I looked at the teenager behind the counter and there were tears in her eyes. I told her, "Ah, don't let her bother you. Look at the bright side. Next time she'll go to Macdonald's!" And she smiled and took my order (I was tempted to ask for hot dogs).

How I hated those words when I was younger (still not found of them) when I asked for something or wanted to see something happen so bad only to hear someone say, “Just wait and see...”

No one likes to wait for anything. Why should we? Waiting is a waste of time. And sometimes waiting can get quite unbearable...

Just ask the Psalmist in today’s reading from Psalm 69.

What does it mean to “wait for the Lord”?

To wait is to trust in God,

to place our faith, our well being each day, each moment into God’s hands.

It is to affirm and keep affirming, no matter the circumstances, that we belong to God, that God loves us, knows our needs and will act to minister to us in God’s own time and way.

### **Centering**

Use this as your centering phrase today:

*"Wait on the Lord"*

### **Praise**

Reflect back on yesterday. What happened during the day for which you would like to give praise and thanks to God this morning and throughout the day?

### **People**

The theme of the day is waiting. Often that involves other people, doesn't it? How impatient we can get with them, starting right in our own homes. How might you practice the discipline of waiting with them this day? And consider this thought - how often do others have to wait for you?

### **Principle**

The principle of the day is learning to wait on the Lord. Reflect on that for your life. How does it apply right now? For what are most waiting for from God?

### **Prayer**

*Lord, it's so hard to wait. We want what we want right now or yesterday. We are not patient people, Lord. But we know, when we stop long enough to reflect, that some times we have to wait, that good things can not always come so quickly. Like our own children, Lord, we cannot always give them what they seem to want when they want it. Likewise, Giving Lord, we*

*must trust that you know what's best and will provide for us in your own time and way. Until then, Lord, we will wait on you...Amen.*

End your prayer by using your centering phrase again for a few moments...



**Day 25**

Reading:

***"They Are What We Climb On"***

Read Genesis 45:1-15.

A mountain climber was asked how he possible made it up and over a ragged, gagged mountain. He pointed to the gagged places and said, "They are the things I climb on." Joseph looked back over his life, to the gagged times, and saw that somehow God used those for him to climb on, to get him in a possible where he could do great good for his family and others.

Spend some time looking back over your own life this week. identify the gagged cliffs and rocks in their past which seemed so enormous, such obstacles then but on which God has enabled you to climb and become who you are, where you are, render service to God and neighbor.

This might also be a good question to ask the congregation and let them answer. What in their past seemed so bad and painful at the time but looking back now they see God helped them climb on, become stronger, become who they are now? What was perhaps meant for harm but God turned to good?

I think also of the wonderful story of Helen Keller. She had some pretty terrible things happen to her - losing her sight and hearing so young. But with her faith and the help of Anne Sullivan, those terrible, gagged rocks helped Helen climb to a position where she was and still is a tremendous inspiration to many physically impaired persons and an advocate for them. Helen would look at those rocks and saw, "They were meant perhaps to harm me, but God turned them to good. They are the things I climbed on." And, like Joseph, it put her in a position to help so many.

It is the same for you and me. The gagged rocks we have faced and climbed over put us in a position to help those who are still facing them, still feeling overwhelmed.

I remember so well when our son was born prematurely. We were on vacation in the mountains. It was a very great and gagged mountain we faced, for we were scared to death. Our son was sick and we did not know, with the other problems of being born early (almost 2 months) if he would live. We learned so much through that, we grew closer to one another and to God. Our son today is a large strapping lad of 22! I share this with you because that was a rock we climbed on! And that experience has helped us help so many others who have been in the same situation. We could give insights and understanding that no one else could, for we had been there, done that. God had empowered us to climb over those rocks and they could too! It helps to have other climbers with you, especially experienced ones. No one should really climb alone. You don't have to!

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

For what or whom would you give praise and thanks this day? Share it below.

### **People**

Lift up in prayer today those you know who are still on those gagged rocks. How might you further reach out in love and care for them today? How might you use your own experiences to help others? Lookout for opportunities today to do just this.

### **Principle**

The truth of the day is that sometimes the difficult things we go through actually can be used to give us greater strength, endurance, teach us, and even enable us to be in minister to others. Spend some time reflecting on the gagged rocks you have climb on in the past. What did you gain and learn? How might this help you in facing new ones?

### **Prayer**

Write your prayer below. Pour out whatever is on your heart and mind. Maybe it's some giant gagged rock you are having trouble climbing over. Recall yesterday's theme on waiting on the Lord. Your prayer time today can just be sitting on that gagged rock and waiting for renewed strength and guidance from God, for sometimes a silent rest is just what we need.

## Day 26

Reading:

### *Pits*

*O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit (Psalm 30:3).*

I heard once about a man who decided to take a shortcut one night while walking. He found himself going through a graveyard. Suddenly, he stepped into air. He had not seen a freshly dug grave. Try as he might, he could not get out. The only thing to do was sit and wait for morning. An hour passed by and he thought he heard someone whistling. He was about to call out when another man fell right into the grave with him. He sat in the corner watching as the other man made futile attempts to get out. Then he said to the man out of the darkness, "You'll never get out." But the other man did!

Today you might find yourself in a pit (A friend of mine says PIT means "Preacher In Training" and he might have a point there. It might also stand for any "Person in Training.") Don't know how or when, but pits happen. We find ourselves in situations we seem hopeless to change or get out of. Or, chances are you might come across someone down in the dumps, fallen into their own pit or one someone else has dug.

Maybe you and they think you'll never get out. But you can! The Lord is with you. Just remember all the times in the past when you were down again, no hope it seemed of getting back up.

Remember the pit of sickness and how God threw down the rope of healing...

Remember the pit of grief and how God let down the ladder of comfort...

Remember the pit of darkness and confusion, and how God brought you light

and direction...

Remember the pit of loneliness and how God brought you a friend...

Whatever the pit, no matter how deep, you are not alone. God is with you. Be patient.

Trust in the one who loves you more than you can know.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Hard to praise God in the pits, isn't it? Maybe that's where you are today or maybe you'll end up there. Pits are everywhere. You may have or be in the pit, but the pit does not have to have you! One of the ways to transcend them is through praise and thanksgiving. Find something today for which you are truly thankful and reflect on it, concentrate on it, express constant praise and thanksgiving for that. Pits do not like praise.

## People

Who do you know who's in the pits today? How might you reach down to them?

## Principle

The truth of the day is that pits happen. They do for everyone. But we can rest assured that we are not alone down there. Part of what the incarnation teaches us is that God comes down to be with us in all circumstances. God is with you. You are not alone. And there are others with you, too, others who have been there, done that; who have a light for the darkness, a strong hand to hold and shoulders to lean on and even climb out on...

## Prayer

*Lord, life can be the pits sometimes. Try as we will, we cannot avoid them all, just too many of them. Some are very deep, Lord. But you came down, didn't you, in Jesus? You reached down to us in him for all time, so that we would know we are not alone, that no situation is hopeless because you are always there. Help us remember You when we are in the pits and when we are not. Amen.*

It's always a good idea to end your prayer time going right back to the first thing you did - centering. It brings all that peace and stillness right back into your heart and mind. Remember to keep using it throughout the day.

**Day 27**

Reading:

***Cracked Pots***

*Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots...For this reason we never become discouraged. Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day by day (1 Corinthians 4:7a, 16).*

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water in his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."



Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

We are all cracked water pots. That's part of what Paul is telling us. But God can use us none-the-less. In fact, it is through our wounds that God's grace and mercy can help bring new life and healing into the world. Who would have ever thought a man named Jesus, a broken and cracked vessel, hanging on a tree could be the source of such living water? But he is and he still flows into our lives, - poor, cracked vessels that we are.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

How has someone used their own woundedness or brokenness to minister to you? Give thanks for them today.

### **People**

How might you use your brokenness to minister to others this day?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, it might not be the one that is shared in the reflection. Perhaps God has some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you. So be alert. Pay attention. Use the space below for notes you take God's classroom.

## Prayer

*Lord, Master Potter, you can even use cracked pots for your purpose. Thank you that even a cracked pot can carry some water. Amen.*

Share your own prayer below and be sure to end with centering...

## Day 28

Reading:

### *Delete the Files*

*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered (Psalm 130:3-4).*

Perhaps you recall reading in the news sometime ago about the FBI under Hoover and how he kept secret files on thousands of people. He had dug up dirt on just about anyone he wished. Knowing the dirty little secrets of people gave him a powerful weapon. Of course, we have learned that he had some of his own.

The Psalmist sings that he sure is glad God does not keep such files. If God did, he ponders, who could escape judgment? But God is forgiving. Those files are deleted by the grace of God, never to be recalled again. Even Norton Utilities can't recover them.

I love that verse in 1 Corinthians 13 that says, "Love does not keep a record of wrongs..." How easy it is for us to keep our own little secret files on people, little items we can pull out from time to time to use against them, to let them know we know, that we have not forgotten. How often in the heat of an argument they are dredged up and used again and again. But love does not keep count or score. Love is forgiving and forgetting. That's how God is with us.

### Centering

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

As you look ahead to the day, what's something you are really looking forward to? Give thanks and praise for that today and throughout the day.

### **People**

Go through your memory files on others and ask God to help you delete items just taking up space there that love should fill.

### **Principle**

I recently had the unpleasant experience of having my hard drive crash. Seems that part of the problem was that I had so many undeleted files that all the memory was taken and placing strains on the system. Today's truth is the same for us - we can be saving a lot of things just taking up space and placing physical, spiritual, and emotional stress on us. Today's principle is to seek God's help in knowing which files we can and need to delete and begin doing so with God's help. As you reflect on this today, share your thoughts, insights and experiences below.

### Prayer

*Loving God, who could escape if you kept records of sins? I couldn't. I would not have a prayer. But you are not into record keeping. You are into forgiveness. Help me to really understand and appreciate this, and to be like this in my relationships with others. Amen.*

Write your own prayer below if you like, or spend now some moments re-centering...

**Day 29**

Reading:

***Word Power***

*Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence* (Psalm 101: 5a).

I believe I read somewhere that it was either Augustine or Martin Luther who had this sign on the wall in their dining room: “An unkind word about unpresent persons will not be spoken at this table.” If that were written and truly followed in all places, some people would have to remain silent, wouldn’t they? Us, too, more often than not. For after all, as Phyllis Diller says, “If you can’t say something good about someone, why let that stop you?”

Sometimes we think that what matters is what we do or not do. Talk is cheap. Not true. Words can sometimes do more long lasting damage than deeds. Words can be weapons as much as knives and guns. They can hurt, cripple, even kill. The pen, the word *is* mightier than the sword.

This simple verse reminds us that we should not be party to such words, not using them or staying in someone’s presence who uses them as weapons. In fact, we are called upon to use words to “silence” such talk. But even that must be done in love. There’s something a little wrong about going out and talking about so- and- so who talks about others persons all the time.

My father- in- law was a man who could not bear to hear others being put down. He would always add something positive about person being discussed or rather diced. That was his subtle way of telling the rest of us to be silent. So there was written all over the walls in his house: “An unkind word about persons not present will not be spoken at this table.”

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks and praise today for the power of words.

### **People**

Reflect on this: How can I use words with the people I meet today to build up rather than tear down?

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? What and why? Remember, be on the lookout today for how God might deepen your understanding of this truth so that you can begin applying it today, or for some new principle or truth God is seeking to teach you.



**Prayer**

*Lord, words have power, don't they? I forget this. Help me use this power to heal rather than hurt, to make whole rather than break, to bless rather than curse. Amen.*

### Day 30

Reading:

#### *To Forgiven Is Divine*

*"Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother..." (Matthew 18: 21a)*

This account in Matthew follows the teaching on the importance of being reconciled with one another. In light of the effort Jesus says we should take to bring about reconciliation, Peter poses a question about just how many times we should forgive. Jesus answers it directly and also with a parable.

What's interesting here is that reconciliation (see the previous passage in Matthew 18)) is now tied to forgiveness. There cannot really be reconciliation without forgiveness. Forgiveness often means that the one who is hurt chooses out of love and value for the other person and that friendship to absorb the pain, not excuse the action, in order to restore that relationship. No wonder forgiveness is not easy to give. Neither is it easy to accept - for it means that one must acknowledge that you have hurt someone else and thus need forgiving.

Verses 21- 22. Peter's Question. To his credit, Peter mentions forgiving 7 times (the teaching of the day said only 3). But it's still based on calculation, still limited. Jesus calls Peter to a forgiveness that is without limit, that isn't calculated. His answer is 70 x 7 (490) or 77 times as the New Revised Standard Version translates it. In other words, don't keep count. If you do, you aren't really forgiving. You are just biding your time until you can get back at the person.

Verses 23- 35 share the story of the unforgiving servant. The servant in this story has an enormous debt he owes the king. But he comes to the king and asks for time to pay it off. The irony is that the sum is such that he could never pay it off. But the king does not give him time, for the king knows he can never repay it, so he forgives the debt. And you would think, then, that

this servant could be able to forgive the tiny debt someone else owed him. But no, he could not. Which revealed that he did not really experience that awesome forgiveness to begin with or at least appreciate it. To be forgiven is to be forgiving.

The point of the story is clear - God's own generosity of forgiveness is the model for our own. We should forgive one another as God forgives us. To truly experience the overwhelming forgiveness of God for our own sins should enable us to be able to forgive the far less things that others do to us.

I cannot think of this without recalling Jesus forgiving the soldiers who just nailed him to the cross or Stephen praying for the forgiveness of those who were stoning him to death. Can you imagine such love? Yet, how very often we find it almost impossible to forgive the tiny pebbles others throw at us.

I think it's important to point out that forgiveness does not excuse others, it does not say that what they have done is okay. Persons must be held responsible for their actions. A wife may well be able to forgive her husband for abuse but that in no way excuses that action or should keep the consequences for that action from coming upon that person. She forgives as much to keep bitterness and anger from destroying her as she does for her husband. But such a person then should receive the full extent of the law and seek help for such behavior. Forgiveness does not sweep things under the rug to hide them as if they do not matter. Forgiveness means loving someone enough to absorb the pain so that healing might take place within one's own soul and hopefully within the life of the other person as well. But that healing cannot really be fully received until the other person sees and acknowledges his/ her responsibility for that pain, that harmful action. Forgiveness does not mean you make yourself a punching bag and take whatever's given. That's really not forgiveness. That is a kind of illness. And that's the danger I

see in a certain interpretation of this text - that it tells persons, women, especially, or anyone being abused, that they should forgive it as if that means accepting it and letting the other person off the hook. A wife may surely somehow find the grace to forgive her abusive husband, but that does not mean she has to continue living with him and certainly not continue being so treated. That is not good or right for her or her husband.

I still recall that picture on the cover of TIME when John Paul II is in that prison cell sitting with the man who shot him and forgiving him. Or the woman who comes to the prison to see the young man who shot and killed her son - to forgive him. Neither is letting the guilty off the hook. They would suffer the consequences for their actions. But here is a forgiveness that's hard to understand or measure. It is a God-like forgiveness.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks today for the gift of forgiveness. Without it, meaningful relationships are not possible, are they?

### **People**

Who do I most need to forgive today? It might just be myself.

### **Principle**

Did some truth from the reading today really speak to you? Put it in your own words below.

### **Prayer**

*Forgiving God, your love and mercy are beyond our understanding. You love us so much that you forgive us. That's what you sent Jesus to tell us. Help us to hear this today as if for the first time. And help us to believe it and share it in every way in our relationships. Amen.*

## Day 31

Reading:

### *Those Who Love & Serve Their City*

*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit...( Rev 18: 1a)*

Most scholars tell us that we should read the Book of Revelation against the background of Roman persecution. Rome ruled the day. Christianity was an illegal religion and Christians were being persecuted for their faith. Even John is in exile on Patmos because of his witness to Christ. Christians are given a choice - worship Caesar as Lord or be exiled or worse (beheaded). Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, is singled out here. It is compared to ancient Babylon, another great persecutor of God's people. Rome is depicted as being corrupt in every way. God's people are called to leave it before it is destroyed (echoes of Sodom and Gomorrah).

Some times I feel the same way as the biblical writer. Not long ago I was taken on a tour of sorts through one of our large cities by a detective who lived and worked there. Homeless people were everywhere. I saw a man in a business suit throw part of a sandwich into a trash can and immediately it was surrounded by the hungry homeless. Others staggered down the sidewalks obviously on alcohol or some other drugs. "See over there?" the detective asked me. I looked over at a street corner. "A drug deal went bad there last night. Kid got killed. That's been my sixth one this month. And over there was a robbery a couple of days ago. Owner was shot, but is still alive." Though there was a beauty and majesty about the skyscrapers and lights, the history and tradition there, they could not overcome the strip clubs and adult bookstores, the prostitutes selling their bodies on almost every street corner, the gangs, the greed, the corruption outside and inside those buildings. I felt shudders quaking through me.

“How do you live and work here?” I asked my friend. “I have thought about leaving,” he said. “But I don’t know... someone has got to try to make a difference... to make things better...”

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks today and find ways to show it for those persons like firemen, police officers, teachers, and others who give so much of themselves in service for us. Maybe you could write a letter to the editor of your local paper in appreciation. What are some other ideas?

### **People**

Pray for all our cities and all communities. Pray today for those who love and serve their city and communities like the officer in the reflection above. What's one thing you can do to help make a difference in the city or community in which you live?

### **Principle**

The truth in today's reflection is to not give into the apathy and hopelessness at the condition of our world. Instead, we can make a difference. It is better to light one candle than merely to curse the dark. If enough persons light candles, what light they can bring.

### **Prayer**

*Lord, how easy it would be to just pack up and get out of Dodge! We see so much evil and suffering around us. We feel soiled. But most of all we feel helpless to do anything about it. I wonder if you ever feel that way too? Help me make a difference, even if it's just a little each day. Amen.*



## Day 32

Reading:

### *Apple Trees & Wells*

*Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in that same year reaped a hundredfold...Isaac dug again the wells of water...(Genesis 26:12a, 18a)*

Early in the 19th Century a man named John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) came to the western Pennsylvania where, for a time, he lived on a little farm near Mars in the Pittsburgh area. There he came to believe that his mission in life was to plant apple trees -- Pippins, Golden Russets, Rambos. He got many of the seeds from the presses of cider mills. He dried them, filled as many sacks as he could carry, and set out to plant them on little plots of open ground -- all the way from Big Broken Straw Creek in the wilderness of what is now Warren County, Pa. through Ohio on into northwestern Indiana -- a distance of 400 miles as the crow flies. In 40 years he walked thousands of miles. He planted apple seeds, he sold them, he also gave many of them away to settlers. He also shared his strong religious faith with all who would listen. It is said that he sang this song or at least it was written based on his life:

*"The Lord is good to me...*

*And so I thank the Lord for giving me...*

*The things I need...*

*The sun and the rain and the apple tree...*

*And some day there'll be apples there,*

*for everyone in the world to share...*

*The Lord is good to me."*

I could not help but be reminded of the above story when I read today's reading from Genesis 26 about Isaac. Everywhere Isaac went, he also sowed seed and especially dug wells. Like Johnny Appleseed, they left a legacy of life, something of themselves that made life just a little bit easier and enriching for those who came after them..

When we look back over the years, when we stop and scan the distance we have traversed, do we see apple trees and wells? Are we leaving a legacy that refreshes, strengthens, inspires others? Will we leave the world a better place than we found it? We cannot be just eaters of apples and dippers from the wells, can we? Let us sow and let us dig in our own ways so that others might be blessed because we came along.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

For what or whom are you most thankful today? Give thanks throughout the day.

### **People**

Be on the lookout today for someone who could use a sweet apple or a cup of cool water. Carry ample supplies with you today.

### **Principle**

How can you start planting a seed or digging a well today?

### **Prayer**

*Lord, we are debtors to so many who have come before us. Because of their efforts, life has been made much sweeter and better for us. Show us, Lord, how we might do this also for generations yet unseen. Show us what to plant, where to dig, how we can in our own ways and places leave a legacy of life. Amen.*

**Day 33**

Reading:

***Move Along***

*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you...*(Genesis 12:1a)

This portion of the story of Abram really took on meaning for me when I felt a call to go to a new place far from where I grew up, far from my friends and family. I did not really wish to leave but the call was so powerful that I could not ignore it. But how very difficult it was to leave all I knew and loved.

Sometimes, I have found, that God calls us to go to new places, to new lands, new experiences – leaving our sources of security and familiarity behind – and depending only on God. For God needs us somewhere else. God wants to do something in us and through us, just like Abram.

I wonder if this is how the Pilgrims and other settlers felt when they left the old world for a new world here in America? They felt called and that God was doing something new in and through them. And so God was.

I do not think that it's always literally a new land to which God calls us. Quite often it might be to some new place in our spiritual journey, some new task at hand that we have not seen before, even some new truth that we have resisted or found difficult to accept. The familiar becomes so comfortable sometimes that we cease seeking to risk, to venture out, to grow. We get in a spiritual rut and a rut, as a friend told me, is just a grave with the ends knocked out.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks and today for new beginnings. After all, each sunrise is just that. So don't be surprised when new beginnings come along throughout the day in many ways.

### **People**

Also be on the lookout today for persons in ruts of various kinds. How might you help them? What words of comfort and assurance could you offer?

### **Principle**

I do not know to what or where God is calling you. But I do know that God is calling you to something new, some new place, some new venture in which God will bless you beyond what you can understand now and also bless others through you. So, listen. God is calling.

**Prayer**

*Lord, you know what is best for us. You know where we need to be and when we need to be there. Help us to trust you and to be sensitive to your call to get up and move along to where you wish us to be. Amen.*

## Day 34

Reading:

### *Time to Leave*

Then the Lord said to Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives. I will be with you” (Genesis 31:13).

It’s 9 a.m. Time to leave for my first worship service. It will be over around 10:30 and that will be time to leave for the second one. If your job lasts from 9 to 5, you know when to be there, when to leave. Wouldn’t it be nice if all decisions were that easy to make, that easy to see? But they aren’t. Not easy to know when to pack it up and hit the road. No set time. No whistle blowing or bell ringing.

Jacob felt that it was the right time to leave Laban, who he had working for as a virtual slave for many years. Of course, Jacob had become wealthy, also helping Laban prosper. But Jacob saw the handwriting on the wall. Laban was not feeling so kindly toward him anymore, in fact, was getting jealous of him and his prosperity. Jacob’s feelings are affirmed when he hears God telling him, “Time to leave, to go back home.”

One of the topics that my clergy friends often discuss is when to leave a pastorate. I have heard so many different ways for deciding when it’s time to leave. Some flee at the first signs of trouble or discontent. They leave too soon. Others stay and slug it out, perhaps staying too long. Not easy to know when it’s time to leave, to move on from any job or place, is it?

I have a comic strip of a preacher standing in the pulpit and right before him is a thick brick wall. He’s been preaching to a wall for some time. In other words, he’s no longer communicating or being heard. For whatever reasons, he has ceased to be able to give the leadership the church needs. Sometimes, honestly, it is the minister’s fault. Maybe he or she

really made some bad calls, or did not do some things that needed to be done. Most of us have been there and perhaps will be again. But some times you run into a brick wall built and constantly fortified by persons with lots of wall building experience. They are better at building them than you are tearing them down. Not all brick walls are ones we should turn away from. Some are just minor roadblocks, normal little barriers to our work and progress. Those we need to spend time examining and finding away through, over, or under them. Just because the going gets tough does not mean you have to get going away! Anything worthwhile will face opposition and barriers. But some times those barriers are so large, so thick that you will do nothing but bruise and break yourself by continually crashing into them. It becomes clear that you have gone as far as you can go in that direction. Even Jesus said that there come times when you have to shake the dust off your feet and head elsewhere.

But this does not have to be a negative experience. Time to leave can also come when you have been, like Jacob, quite successful. You've accomplished the things God sent you there to do. You've done all you can do there. When you cease to be challenged, when you feel a pull in some new direction, to use your gifts in some others ways and places, when you keep hearing that divine whisper in your ear like Jacob, well, that may well be the time to leave. I think it better to leave when all is well than staying too long.



### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

As you reflect on yesterday, what's something that happened for which you wish to give praise and thanks today?

### **People**

If you sense in your spirit that it might be time to leave, whatever that means for you now, who would be the person or persons you could go to and talk with about it? What's keeping you from doing so?

### **Principle**

Think back to the major times when you have to leave. How did you know? Is another time on the horizon? Remember that leaving is just a way of arriving to that next place God is leading you.

### **Prayer**

*Lord, it is not easy to know when you wish us to go or where. Sometimes it is quite confusing and scary. We do not give up our security easily, even if it is coming at great pain to us. Help us, calling God, to know when to stay, when to leave. Like Jacob, bless our efforts for your kingdom, but keep us ever ready to move along when you need us elsewhere. For when it's all said and done, you are our security. You said that you would be with Jacob. We hear you, Lord, saying the same thing to us. So whether we go or stay now, we will give our best, knowing you are with us always. Amen.*

**Day 35**

Reading:

***None of the Above***

*“Teacher, whose sins caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents’ sin?”*

John 9:2

And how did Jesus answer that question? “His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents’ sins. He is blind so that God’s power might be seen in him.”

Of all the wonderful things Jesus said, these rank among the greatest to me. And they must have been even more wonderful to that poor blind man and his parents. All their lives they had believed that his blindness was their fault, was due to some sin on their part. How could this be on his part, you ask, when he was born that way? Well, some of the rabbis taught that you could even sin in your mother’s womb! So, to be told one thing all your life, to have all that guilt and then to suddenly be told for the first time, “Sorry. None of the above is correct. It was not due to your sin or that of your parents. Behold now the glory of God...” And with those very words the healing began in his life and that of his parents.

Guilt is an awful thing to live with. It is a heavy burden that can crush us. Sometimes it is our responsibility, what we have done to deserve it. It can and should then lead us to bended knee before God. This is good guilt. It leads to repentance and change of life. But there is bad guilt. Often it is heaped on us by others or by beliefs and conditions over which we have very little control. Nonetheless, we feel responsible. I know a man who carried for a long time the deaths of his wife and daughter. They died in a freak auto accident and he blamed himself. He had planned to drive them that day but had been called into work. It took a long time for him to forgive himself.

There are things most of us carry, emotional baggage since we were children perhaps that get heavier every year. Maybe it was a word said to us or about us. Maybe it was something we have assumed responsibility for that we now need to let go and see the truth. The same Christ is here and says, *“It was not that you sinned or anyone else, but let it go now and let the glory of God be seen in you.”*

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks today for the awesome grace of God that can free us from undue guilt that weighs us down and robs us of the abundant life God wants to give.

### **People**

Let come to mind today that person who you know is carrying around a ton of guilt, or remorse that's robbing him or her of the joy God wishes to give them. Seek an opportunity to reach out in some other way to that person.

**Principle**

Forgive yourself today.

**Prayer**

*Lord, forgive me when I have made the lives of others more difficult with unkind words and thoughts, making their suffering even greater. And help me to forgive myself and live in the freedom and glory of your light and love. Amen.*

**Day 36**

Reading:

***Like Minded***

*"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."* (Philippians 2:5).

I confess that I am a Trekkie or Trekker. My favorite character is Mr. Spock. He has some amazing abilities...the most amazing is the mind-meld. He can, by touching a person's face, know what they are thinking and feeling, i.e., their minds become one.

Wish I could do that. It would be a neat and helpful ability for a pastor (or anyone) to have, for it's difficult, almost impossible often to know what others are really feeling and thinking. We hide them fairly well many times. Seems that a lot of misunderstanding could be avoided and closeness received if we could mind-meld.

Well, I know that's just TV. But I have known people, so do you, who seem to be able to do something almost as wonderful. I have known couples who were so in tune to one another that one could start a sentence and the other could finish it. They were "like minded." The two really seemed to have become one in their understanding of one another. Do you have someone like that? Someone with whom you are like minded? It's a pretty special relationship.

Seems to me that Paul is telling us this very same thing - to be like minded with Christ! To mindmeld with the Son of God...to be so in tune with him that we are one mind, we know what he thinks, how he feels, we have the same mindset...we see ourselves, God, others and the world in the same way...How is that? Through servanthood...through humbling ourselves to serve God, even if that means a cross...for such a life is the one overwhelming evidence that we are truly like minded with Christ...

Though the Son of God, he had every right to ride into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday upon a white horse and be crowned with a golden, bejeweled crown...but he comes riding in on a donkey that bears burdens...he comes to receive a crown of thorns...He has every right to expect a flowing robe like a king...but he accepts only the purple robe of mockery...He should be the one the whose feet are kissed and washed, instead, he kneels like a common slave and washes the soiled, dirty, smelly feet of the world...

When we desire and begin to live out that kind of humble servanthood, then we are truly becoming like-minded with Christ.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks today for Christ and the example he set for us and helps us follow.

### **People**

Be on the lookout today for opportunities to follow the example of Christ in humbly serving others, even the most lowly among us.

### **Principle**

What is the principle or truth God would teach you or remind you of today? How will you apply it in your life?

### **Prayer**

*Lord, it is truly hard to be humble when we feel so perfect in so many ways, so intent on getting our own rights, getting what's coming to us. When we begin to think this way and feel this way, take us to Golgotha. Let our eyes rest upon the Son of God on a cross. Amen.*

Remember to end by going back to your centering word or phrase for a few moments...



**Day 37**

Reading:

***The "S" Word***

*The body is not to be used for sexual immorality, but to serve the Lord; and the Lord provides the body* (1 Corinthians 6:13b).

There is a large rock hill at Corinth that overlooks the city. It is called the "Acrocorinth." On top of it was a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Many prostitutes served in the temple. In fact, they descended into the town at nightfall to carry out their profession which was understood to be religious service. Corinth was notorious for its sexual immorality. Nothing was out of bounds. Paul writes to Christians who had been very much a part of this lifestyle and who, perhaps, found it difficult to fully leave it behind.

Nothing has changed much, has it? Every kind of sexual immorality imaginable is alive and well today. It is depicted on TV, in books, magazines, movies, and thrives on the internet. Standards of faithfulness, commitment, chastity, and abstinence seem like obsolete, foreign concepts to many. An ancient Corinthian would feel most at home in our world.

Paul writes so much about sexual immorality because he senses a lack of concern on the part of the Corinthians. They are not shocked at all by this kind of behavior. Some perhaps even thought Paul was being prudish and unreasonable. After all, it was human nature. Everyone was doing it. Some no doubt thought he was being naïve or too idealistic to expect them to live by such high sexual standards.

A friend of mine was in a meeting of parents set up by the local school board. They were discussing sex education and the kind of things parents wanted to be taught. Every birth control method available was mentioned except abstinence, which my friend mentioned. He was just

about laughed out of the room. That was just unrealistic. And that's the kind of world we live in today.

Paul might well ask us if we have grown numb to the immorality around us. Does anything shock us anymore? Should not the world hear the voice of the church weeping? Should it not hear the voice of the church saying, "NO! There is a much better way."? The world needs to hear our voice, to hear the teachings of the church, not just that such behavior is wrong, but why it is wrong, and what's best for us. God intended sexuality to be a great gift to us, to enrich our lives. But it, like all God's good gifts, has been badly abused - and our whole society suffers for it in many ways.

We believe that sex is such a wonderful gift that it deserves a relationship of the highest commitment and faithfulness - marriage. And that within such a relationship it finds its greatest fulfillment and enjoyment.

We believe that the body is God's temple, that we cannot just do anything with it that we please. In not sexually misusing it, we honor God. In not sexually misusing others, we honor them and ourselves. For read very carefully what Paul writes in this passage (especially verses 15ff). Much is at stake in our sexual behavior. In a way, it is unlike any other kind of behavior. The very nature of the sex act itself is such that it is so personal, so intimate, so at the essence of who we are that to share this with someone else is to share the essence of who we are, it is to create a bond with that person that we will always have - physically and mentally, even spiritually. It's not just something you walk away from. The fact that it carries the potential to create a whole new human being should in and of itself tell us just how very powerful sex is at all levels. That simple act each time carries life-long consequences.

The real tragedy is that so many people are settling for far less than is their right. They believe they are living it up. They do not know they are actually cheating themselves. Perhaps, in their honest moments, they would admit that something is missing. Else, why go from one relationship, from one person to another constantly. Outside a relationship of real love and commitment, sex loses its true power and ultimate fulfillment. When two people have grown to know one another, to share their dreams, to commit themselves wholly to one another, who grow over the years closer together, then sex is ever so much more fulfilling. It is enriched by the daily walking and talking, the facing of difficult times together, the joys and struggles, a common faith, growing trust...Sex finds its greatest power to bless us only within a relationship of the deepest intimacy and commitment.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks today for God's good gift of sexuality.

### **People**

Our culture is bombarded in so many ways that portray persons, especially women, as mere "its," things for sexual gratification. In fact, I checked by email today and it, too, was filled with countless such materials. Let us be careful that we are not drawn into this evil. Today we will see and respect everyone with purity of thought, word, and action.

### **Principle**

Reading over Paul's teachings and the reflection above, what principle or truth most stands out to you and why? How will you live it out today?

### **Prayer**

*Loving God, you give us so many wonderful gifts. Thank you for our bodies. We are wonderfully made. Help us use our bodies at all times in ways that honor you and others. Help the world that so often abuses this good gift. Show us how we might be examples and teachers,*

*so that others might better understand what they are doing to themselves and others, and what they are missing. Amen.*

Write your own prayer in the space below.

## Day 38

Reading:

### *Early Will I Seek Thee - Part 1*

Psalm 63:1 "O God, thou art my God; EARLY WILL I SEEK THEE...." (King James Version).

Do you ever get a tune or song in your mind and you can't get rid of it?

I remember once getting the tune to "Gilligan's Island" stuck in my mind like a broken record. For three days I couldn't stop it! Drove me crazy! Oops...just writing about it tends to bring it back...if it starts playing in your mind...well...sorry...

Sometimes a verse from the Bible does that. Some phrase from my daily reading just lodges in my mind and for days, even weeks I find myself reflecting on it. The more you read and study the Bible, the more common this experience. Unlike a silly tune from a television show, you don't want to try to get rid of it. In fact, you find it of great comfort and guidance. God, you see, has a way, as we study the Word, of putting those verses, those truths we most need right there into our hearts and minds, ready when we need them.

A phrase from the Psalms has been playing over and over again in my heart recently:

*"O God, thou art my God; EARLY WILL I SEEK THEE..."*

As you know, since you are following this Morning Manna Diet, this concept is at the heart of this book. So our last three daily reflections will focus once again.

This teaching says to me to seek God early in my life and encourage others to do the same.

"Remember your creator in the days of your youth..." (Ecclesiastes.12:1).

What greater tragedy is there than to try to go through life without knowing God? We can make a lot of friends, have many companions in our days, but none so important or meaningful than God.

I know that you want many things in your life and out of life. You have a lot of dreams and needs. But don't be misled. Your greatest need is GOD! Without a meaningful relationship with God, you will never be whole or happy. As St. Augustine said, "Lord, you made us for yourself, and we can never know rest until we rest in thee." Count on this. You can have everything your heart has ever desired, but without God, you will always feel empty and unfulfilled.

What would happen if you took a record and bored a hole just off center of it and then tried to play it? What would it sound like? Pretty awful. Yet, if you place the record on the center, then you bring out the beauty of the music that's there. There is beautiful music in each of us. And it will come out of our life the closer we get to the right center - God!"

The Psalmist wrote, "For you, O God, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth" (71:5). If my children and those I work with can one day say this, then I will feel that I have been a successful parent and teacher.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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**Praise**

For what are you most thankful today?

**People**

Who are the young ones in your life for which you can provide an example of loving and seeking God above all else?

**Principle**

What's the principle or truth you feel God wants to teach you today? Did you find one in the reflection above? Or perhaps it will come later in the day, so pay attention. Share your lesson learned in the space below.



**Prayer**

*Lord, we want to be better examples for the young ones around us this new year. May our steps lead them closer to you - our Holy Center. Amen.*

**Day 39**

Reading:

***Early Will I Seek Thee (Part 2)***

Psalm 63:1 "O God, thou art my God; EARLY WILL I SEEK THEE...." (KJV).

What does this mean for you and me?

I think it means, "Seek the Lord EARLY in all your decisions and endeavors."

How many decisions, great or small, will we make this year? On how many of them will we seek God's guidance?

I confess that often I have made decisions without asking God's guidance. Sometimes I've started some new venture without even thinking about God! You know what I discovered? Most of these didn't work out so well. Some were real bummers.

Have you ever had that experience? You make a decision all on your own. It's a disaster. And you prayed, "Lord, why didn't I check this out with you first?" Of course, we still must act in faith and still might fail. But when we do, it seems we are better able to cope with it because we are truly seeking God's will.

We are not here to do our own thing! We are Christians! We proclaim, "Jesus is Lord!" IF he is Lord, then we should be constantly turning to him for direction and guidance in everything. We live to serve and honor him.

This is not just for the major decisions - but every decision - no matter how large or small. Not one of them is unimportant to God. God cares about every part of our lives, and wants to be involved in every part.

And what about our church? What about all the meetings and plans we will have and make this year? Wonder what would happen in this coming year if the church had but one agenda - To seek, to know, to do God's will?

"In all thy ways acknowledge God, and God shall direct thy path (Proverbs 3:6). Lord, let this be our daily prayer, our most heartfelt desire this year. Let it be S.O.P. - Standard Operating Procedure!

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Reflect back to one time in your life when you sought and found God's direction for your life. Give thanks for that and the encouraging truth that God still guides and cares about all our decisions.

### **People**

Who is someone on your heart and mind today facing some important decisions? Bring them into God's presence through prayer.

### **Principle**

Read the reflection again. What truth is it sharing with you? Put it in your own words below and your thoughts about it as the day progresses.

### **Prayer**

*Forgive me, Lord, when I just go ahead and make decisions without even consulting you. That's not very smart, is it? Let me be wiser today and each day. Amen.*

You may wish to write below you specific prayer for some decision you are facing right now...

**Day 40**

Reading:

***Early Will I Seek Thee (Part 3)***

Psalm 63:1 "O God, thou art my God; EARLY WILL I SEEK THEE...." (KJV).

What does that mean for us?

To me this means to seek God early in the day, which is one of the most important points I have tried to get across in this book.

I shared earlier about how my daughter, when she was small, was always the first person up in our house each morning. She was the self-appointed alarm clock for the rest of us. Her first action was to come into our bedroom and make sure we were awake. She'd climb up onto the bed and snuggle between us. Her first thought is to find mom and dad. She did that because she wanted to be with us. She needed to know we were there. Then everything else would be okay.

Can you think of a better way for God's children to begin each day than with thoughts of God and a desire to seek God? Snuggling up to God is a great way to begin the day. As much as I like my morning coffee, the "best part of waking up" is not Folger's in my cup," but God in my heart, on my mind.

This gets the day off right, it focuses us on the right things, the most important priorities. Best of all it gives us a sense of God's presence throughout the day. When we know God is with us, we are then better able to face whatever the day may bring.

One day a mother was searching anxiously for her six-year old son. At last she saw him way up near the top of the tallest tree in their yard. "Johnnie," she cried out, "you get down here right this minute!" She watched nervously as the little boy climbed limb by limb down to the ground. As he walked toward her, she noticed a very serious look on his face. "What were you

doing up there?" she scolded him. He looked up at her with a seriousness on his face she had never seen before and said, "Mommy, I went up there to look for God."

Well, my prayer for you is that each day might find you, maybe not in the top of trees, but with a greater desire to seek God - starting this day, right now, and in every decision we face, and early in each new day. I can hope nothing greater for you or myself than a ever deepening sense of the presence of God in our lives. God wants this even more than we do, and so provides manna fresh every morning for those willing to look for and consume it.

### **Centering**

From the reading above, what's a KEY WORD or PHRASE that stands out to you? Write it here and use it in your centering exercise now and throughout the day.

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### **Praise**

Give thanks today for the God who is ever seeking you. Be sure to allow yourself to be found.

### **People**

Remember, as you finish this forty day program but hopefully will continue it on your own and in your own way, that our walk with God always also involves others. Keep your mind and heart open to them, and in so doing you will find that you are drawn even closer to God.

### **Principle**

The principle for today is at the heart of this book - to seek God first and foremost each morning. You have come to the end of this program. But I hope not to the end of your opening your life and your day each day by seeking God's presence, by consuming the wondrous manna God provides each morning.

### **Prayer**

*"I met God in the morning when the day was at its best...So I think I know the secret; learned from many a troubled way; you must seek God in the morning, if you want God through the day." (From a poem entitled "The Secret") Amen! And Amen!*

## Spiritual Classics

(Or they should be)

Confessions, by St. Augustine  
 Interior Castles, by St. Teresa of Avila  
 On Divine Images, by St. John of Damascus  
 The Cloud of Unknowing  
 The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius  
 The Golden Epistle, by William of St. Thierry  
 The Mind's Road to God, by Saint Bonaventura  
 The Book on Loving God, Treatises II, by Bernard of Clairvaux  
 The Practice of the Presence of God with Spiritual Maxims, by Brother Lawrence  
 The Meaning of Faith, by Harry Emerson Fosdick  
 The Meaning of Prayer, by Fosdick  
 Any set of sermons by Fosdick  
 Life Together, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
 A Diary of Private Prayer, by John Baillie  
 Spiritual Literacy, by Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat  
 Mysticism, by Evelyn Underhill  
 The Wounded Healer/ or Here and Now, or anything by Henri Nouwen  
 The Music of Silence, by David Steindl-Rast and Sharon  
 From the Angel's Blackboard, by Fulton J. Sheen  
 Telling Secrets/ or the Sacred Journey, by Frederick Buechner (and anything by him)  
 The Ground We Share: Everyday Practice, Buddhist and Christian, by Brother David Steindl-Rast and David Aitken  
 Sacraments of Love, by Andrew Greeley  
 Ordinarily Sacred, by Lynda Sexson  
 Wisdom of Celtic Saints, by Edward C. Sellner  
 Grace's Window, by Suzanne Guthrie  
 The Way of Woman, by Helen M. Luke  
 The Awful Rowing Toward God, by Anne Sexton  
 Where the Heart Is, edited by Julienne Bennett and Mimi Luebberrmann  
 Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home, by Richard Foster (and anything else by him)  
 Entering the Sacred Mountain, by David A. Cooper  
 Facing the World with Soul: The Reimagination of Modern Life, by Robert Sardello  
 My Heart Soars, by Chief Dan George and Helmet Hirschall  
 Returning: A Spiritual Journey, by Dan Wakefield  
 Praying Our Goodbyes, by Joyce Rupp  
 The Song of the Bird, by Anthony de Mello (and anything else by him)  
 Gabriel's Palace: Jewish Mystical Tales, by Howard Schwartz  
 The Attentive Heart, by Stephanie Kaza  
 Life Song, by Bill Schul (see other publications by Stillpoint Publishing)  
 Spiritual Politics, by Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson  
 Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World, by Linda Hogan



Earth Prayers from Around the World, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon  
 Where God Begins to Be, by Karen Karper  
 Secular Sanctity, by Edward Hays  
 Sages and Dreamers, by Elie Wiesel  
 Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, by Annie Dillard (and anything else by her)  
 Open Mind: Women's Daily Inspiration for Becoming Mindful, by Diane Mariechild  
 The Kitchen Mystic: Spiritual Lessons on Everyday Life, by Mary Hayes-Grieco  
 Christian Mysticism, by William McNamara  
 Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day, by Brigid O'Shea  
 Handbook for the Soul, edited by Richard Carlson and Benjamin Shield  
 Everyday Sacred, by Sue Bender  
 Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now, by Maya Angelou  
 Lake Woebegone Days, by Garrison Keillor (and anything else by him)  
 To Dance with God, by Gertrud Mueller Nelson  
 Anything by G.K. Chesterton  
 Centering, by Mary Caroline Richards  
 A Big-Enough God, by Sara Maitland  
 Blues Ain't Nothing but a Good Soul Feeling Bad, by Sheldon Kopp and Bessie Hesse  
 Set Your Heart on the Greatest Gift: Living the Art of Christian Love, by Morton Kelsey (and anything else by him)  
 Walking on Water, by Madeleine L'Engle  
 Care of the Soul, by Thomas Moore  
 Legacy of the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood, by Wayne Muller  
 Of Human Hands: A Reader in the Spirituality of Work, by Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
 Parables: The Arrows of God, by Megan McKenna  
 Not All of Us Are Saints, by David Hilfiker  
 The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring, by Parker J. Palmer  
 The Book of Words, by Lawrence Kushner  
 Spiritual Illuminations, by Peg Streep  
 Women Who Run with the Wolves, by Clarissa Pinkola Estes  
 A Walk Between Heaven and Earth, by Burghild Holzer  
 Western Spirituality, edited by Matthew Fox  
 Ordinary Time, by Nancy Mairs  
 Soulwork, by Betty Clare Moffatt  
 Recovering: A Journal, by May Sarton  
 Dialogues with a Modern Mystic, by Andrew Harvey and Mark Matousek  
 In a High Spiritual Season, by Joan Chittister  
 No Ordinary Moments, by Dan Millman  
 To Taste and See, by Thomas W. Mann  
 Embracing the Beloved, by Stephen and Ondrea Levine  
 In the Womb of God, by Celeste Snowber Schroeder  
 Communion, Community, Commonweal, edited by John S. Mogabgab  
 Toward Holy Ground: Spiritual Directions for the Second Half, by Margaret Guenther  
 Nourishing the Soul: Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life, edited by Anne Simpkinson and Rose Solari  
 Stations: The Way of the Cross, by Daniel Berrigan and Margaret Parker  
 Beholding God in Many Faces, by Holly Bridges Elliott

Becoming Bread, by Gunilla Norris  
You Can Know God: Christian Spirituality for Daily Living, by Marilyn Gustin  
Seasons of Your Heart: Prayers and Reflections, by Macrina Wiederkehr  
Uh-Oh, by Robert Fulghum (and any of his other books)

On Writing

Writing from the Center, by Scott Russell Sanders  
The Pleasures of Diaries, by Ronald Blythe  
On Writing for Your Life, by Deena Metzger  
Writing Past Dark, by Bonnie Friedman  
The Writing Life, by Annie Dillard

**Centering Activity**  
***The Sound of the Sea***

Note: You can purchase CD's that have the sound of the sea and other sounds from nature. They are helpful when first starting to use this kind of centering technique.

1. get into a comfortable position...sitting...even lying down on the floor, whatever is comfortable for you...
2. Close your eyes
3. Relax...let every muscle in your body relax...
4. Take a breath...take another in slowly and exhale slowly...
5. In your mind you are now by the ocean...
6. Your shoes are off and you can feel the warm sand beneath your feet...
7. You feel the ocean breeze...
8. The sun warms your face...
9. You see the sea gulls dipping and darting through the air...
10. Now you see the ocean waves rushing up onto the shore and bathing your feet...
11. As another wave comes up about your feet, name some anxiety, worry or source of stress for you...release it to the wave, let the wave carry it out and leave it into the depths of the sea...
12. As another healing, soothing wave comes, name some sin in your life, something you have not done or have done that has been burdening you...let it go, too, let the wave have it, carrying it away in the grace of God's forgiveness...
13. As another wave comes, give to it anything else that's on your heart or mind that's keeping you from being here in this place, this time...give it to the wave which will take it to the depths of the sea...
14. And suddenly the waves begin to grow calm, peacefully lapping the shore...and as they cease their restlessness, that same peace and calm passes into you as well...you are at rest, you are unburdened...you feel whole...
15. You begin to slowly walk down the beach. See your footprints in the sand...

16. Suddenly, you are aware of another set of footprints right beside you...
17. You sense the presence of God walking with you...
18. You feel God's arm about your shoulder...
19. Enjoy God's presence, enjoy the walk, for you know that God's going to walk there with you the whole day...
20. Now, in your own way, listen for what God would tell you...what's God whispering to you...what do you most need God to say to you...
21. Now, talk with God, tell God what's on your heart...take a moment to tell God what you most need to say...
22. Now take a couple of moments to keep your eyes closed...to enjoy the peace, the Presence...and when you are ready, open them again...

## Five Finger Prayer

(See page \_\_\_\_\_ in your booklet)

I learned this little prayer model in church school and still sometimes use it.

1. Your thumb is nearest to you so begin your prayers by praying for those closest to you. C.S. Lewis called praying for our loved ones "sweet duty".
2. The next finger is the pointing finger. Pray for those who teach, instruct, and heal. This includes teachers, doctors, and ministers. They need support and wisdom in pointing other in the right direction. Keep them in your prayers.
3. The next finger is the tallest figure. It reminds us of our leaders. Pray for the president, leaders in industry, and administrators. Also for world leaders, even our enemies. These people shape our nation, world, and guide public opinion. They need God's guidance.
4. The fourth finger is our ring finger. Surprising to many is the fact that this is our weakest finger, as any piano teacher will testify. It should remind us to pray for those who are weak, in trouble, or in pain. They need your prayers day and night. You cannot pray too much for them.
5. And last comes our little finger, the smallest of all, which is where we should put ourselves in relation to God and others. As the Bible says, "the least shall be the greatest among you." Your pinkie should remind you to pray for yourself. By the time you have prayed for the other four, your own needs will be in a proper perspective and you will be able to pray for yourself more effectively.