

Making Time for God:

Personal Devotions

by Bev Marshall-Goodell

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Why make time for God?

Every healthy relationship takes time to develop and maintain. Christians who seek to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ can best accomplish this goal by adopting a habit of daily devotional time. God can speak to us through other Christians, such as through preaching or mentoring, and directly to us through the Holy Spirit, but the primary way in which we make ourselves open to God speaking to us is through the Bible.

Persons who choose to become followers of Jesus are most likely to grow in their faith and obedience by learning the teachings of Jesus and making them part of their daily living. If you don't know Jesus' teachings, you cannot live by them. Imagine trying to plan an evening with your best friend if you have no idea what he or she enjoys or prefers. You may know very well what you like to do, but not understand what your friend likes. By investing time in your relationship with God through Jesus, you will come to know the heart of God.

What are personal devotions?

There are three major approaches to personal devotions considered in this course: the Daily Office, Evangelical Quiet Time, and Spiritual Meditation.

The Daily Office. The practice of set prayers for different times during the day has its roots in Judaism. The early Christian Church encouraged the saying of morning and evening prayers. The Daily Office was further developed within catholic monasteries to include morning, midday, evening and late night orders for prayer. These prayer times typically include a mixture of formal prayers (e.g., The Lord's Prayer), personal prayers (e.g., confessions), hymns, Psalms and other Bible readings. The focus of the Daily Office is worship.

Evangelical Quiet Time. During the 19th century this practice emerged based on daily Bible reading and private reflection and prayer based on the reading. The purpose of this quiet time was to aid the believer in understanding the Bible and applying biblical teachings to daily living. Originally the Bible was the primary resource for quiet time, and this was the principle means for individual Bible study.

Spiritual Meditation. Meditation is practiced in a wide variety of religious traditions. Christian meditation can make use of "inspirational music" (e.g., hymns, classical music, contemporary Christian music, nature sounds) and a wider variety of texts than just the Bible (e.g. Native American, Mystics, non-Christian religions) in combination with focused attention on God and God's teachings.

Each of these approaches to personal devotions was developed to help a person become receptive to the transformation God offers. In the 20th century a wide variety of authors and institutions produced a multitude of resources for personal devotions. Most of these resources include at a minimum a Bible reading, a reflection, and a prayer. Others include questions for additional reflection, journaling and application. Some devotional guides are general purpose, while others

are designed for a specific audience (e.g., men, women, teens, older adults) or a specific purpose (e.g., for beginners, for parents, for teachers). Popular examples of general purpose resources for brief daily devotions include *The Upper Room*, *Our Daily Bread*, *The Upper Room Disciplines*, *Streams in the Desert*, and *My Utmost for His Highest*. If you are unsure about what to select for a devotional resource, ask your pastor or Christian friends what they use.

Personal devotion time is not to be confused with a separate Bible reading/listening plan to improve Bible literacy. The primary goal of personal devotions is transformation rather than information. Time spent reading and asking God for guidance and intervention is to be balanced with time spent reflecting on what was read and listening for what God might be saying for you at this time.

Finding what works for you.

As with any relationship, variety and creativity help to keep things fresh. However, the following suggestions may be helpful in developing and maintaining meaningful and transformative devotional time. The exact order in which you do things is less critical than that you do them.

1. Prepare your heart.

Go through a few questions before starting, such as: Do I need to forgive anyone? Do I have to ask anyone to forgive me? Is anything in my heart blocking me from getting the most from this personal act of devotion? Do I need to confess any sin?

2. Offer praise and thanksgiving.

If you were entering the presence of a powerful earthly ruler, your first words would not be about yourself. You would first show respect and love for the ruler. Likewise when you come before God you should first offer your adoration and praise, and gratefully acknowledge the blessings have received. Music is often helpful in leading you into praise and thanksgiving. It does not matter whether you simply listen to recorded music or sing along.

3. Check-in with God.

Spend some time talking to God honestly and openly about whatever is on your heart. Share your emotions and needs as well as you hopes and dreams. Talk with God like you talk with your closest friend.

4. Read something from the Bible.

Find a Bible that is easy for you to read and understand. You might want to invest in a study Bible or a devotional Bible that includes supplemental material to help you understand what you read. A daily devotional guide will recommend a selection for each day. If you aren't using a devotional guide, consider starting with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which offer accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus from different perspectives.

Bible reading in devotions is not the same as Bible study. In devotions, a few verses are sufficient, even preferable. Read carefully and prayerfully. The quality rather than the quantity of your reading is important. It is generally wise to put Bible reading before prayer because what you read will shape your understanding of what needs to be prayed about.

5. Reflect on what you have read.

Many daily devotional guides include someone else's reflection on Scripture to help get you started. Then look for things like: 1) a command to be obeyed, 2) a promise to be claimed, 3) an example to follow, 4) a sin to be confessed, or 5) a picture of God. Ask yourself these three questions: 1) What does it say? 2) What does it mean? 3) How can I apply this to my life today?

Some people find it helpful to write down their thoughts and reflections in a journal or notebook. Include not only the date but the Scripture reference that you read from. Your notes can be as long or short as you would like. Also, they can take the form of statements, summaries, questions and/or additional thoughts and commentary.

Spiritual meditation is a form of reflection on your reading. You may choose to focus on a single word or concept, like God's love, or on your response to a specific issue or concern, such as your need to offer forgiveness. Meditation serves the purpose of integrating what you have read so that it becomes a part of your daily life. It is a way to focus your listening on what God has to say to you.

6. Pray.

Prayer is simply conversation with God. Expect your conversation with God to be two-way, spending time both talking and listening. People who have little experience with personal prayer may prefer to begin with the historic prayers of the church, such as The Lord's Prayer or the Psalms from the Bible. The United Methodist Hymnal includes Orders of Daily Praise and Prayer for morning and evening (pages 876-879) that contain options for prayers, hymns and Scripture that are similar in format to the Daily Office form for devotions.

Pray about the material you have read, asking for help in understanding what it means and how you can make it part of your faith walk.

Pray for people and concerns that are important to you. You may keep a list of needs for which you pray every day, or you may rotate through your prayer list focusing on a different group of people or issues for each day of the week (e.g., Monday: family, Tuesday: friends, Wednesday: people in the church, Thursday: church and school ministries, Friday: mission needs, Saturday: the nation and world, Sunday: yourself).

Tips and tricks

Many people struggle to make time for personal devotions. This problem may occur because while we recognize that personal devotions are important, they are generally not considered urgent, like ringing telephones and short deadlines. Many people find it challenging to balance the demands of work or school and family.

Finding the right time and place for your life situation is important. Early morning can be a good time for many, because your personal devotions can set a positive tone for the rest of the day. Just getting up fifteen minutes earlier than before could gain the time you need. If early morning does not work for you, linking your daily devotions with something you do everyday or choosing another fixed time of the day, such as lunchtime or bedtime, can help insure that your devotions do not get forgotten.

In the absence of a specific time each day, you may be able to claim a time that you are otherwise not putting to good use. Is there a time in the day where you normally kick back and relax, to watch television, read a book or play on the computer? That could be a time slot to spend time on your personal devotions. Is there time during lunch for you to do a short personal devotion? If you regularly share your lunch time with someone else, you may have an opportunity to introduce that person to the practice of daily devotions. Do you commute to work or school? That could be a time slot to listen to your Bible or Christian music. Do you chat with your spouse before going to sleep? That could be a time to read the Bible and pray together. It is not simply the length of time you give to personal devotions, but the quality and consistency of your devotional time that will help you grow in your faith.

Start with a short time for your daily devotions, such as five minutes, and build up to more time. Most people can easily work up to fifteen minutes a day. Consider setting a final goal of thirty minutes each day.

There can be advantages to choosing a specific location for your devotions. The ideal place is one that is separated from distractions and has room for you to store devotional resources such as your Bible, devotional guide(s), journal and prayer list. However, in the absence of a fixed location for your devotional time, you should consider how to make your devotional materials portable.

If you find that you fall asleep in prayer or reading the Bible, then pray or read out loud. If that doesn't work for you, pray and read standing up or even walking. Praying and reading out loud or walking is also a good cure for a wandering mind.

Realize that personal devotions are a choice. If we have relationship with God based on a "have to" then it is more like work than love. Personal devotions are best when based on love. Make a plan for your personal devotions and share your plan with a friend or family member, so that you will be held accountable to your plan.

Do not beat yourself up about missing one day of devotions. Try to complete it later in the day if at all possible, and recommit to doing better the next day.

There are many resources available on the Internet that you might find useful. Some web sites provide a devotional reading each day, and others will email a Scripture and devotional reading to you each day. Here are a few web sites you might consider:

www.backtothebible.org/devotions/html

www.prayerandbiblestudy.com

www.rbc.org/odb/odb.shtml

www.todayintheword.com

www.upperroom.org/devotional

My Plan for Personal Devotions

The best time of day for me to regularly have personal devotions is:_____

For the next thirty days, I commit to spend ____ minutes a day on my personal devotions.

After I have made personal devotions a daily habit, I will work to increase my time spent in daily devotions to _____ minutes a day.

The best time of day for me to spend in daily devotions is_____

The best place for me to conduct my daily devotions is _____

If I can't make my regular time and place for daily devotions work, I will _____

____ I already have an easy-to-understand Bible OR ____ I will find an easy-to-understand Bible.

I will start my personal devotions using:

- ____ The Daily Office approach
- ____ The Evangelical Quiet Time approach
- ____ The Spiritual Meditation approach
- ____ Another approach that will include:_____

Other resources I need to obtain:

- ____ Daily Office material such as United Methodist Hymnal or Book of Common Prayer
- ____ daily devotional book, calendar or on-line resource
- ____ notebook or prayer journal
- ____ music

I will seek to organize and balance my prayer time by:

- ____ including time each day for ACTS=adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication
- ____ using a different prayer focus for each day of the week
 - Monday=_____ Tuesday=_____
 - Wednesday=_____ Thursday=_____
 - Friday=_____ Saturday=_____
 - Sunday=_____
- ____ keeping and updating a prayer list for current prayer needs
- ____ some other system (describe)_____

I will gather all of the needed resources by this date:_____

and begin my personal devotions on this date:_____

I have shared my plan for personal devotions with this person who will help hold me accountable:_____

Personal Devotions Assessment

(To be completed after the first full week since you started.)

This week I was able to set aside time for personal devotions on ___ out of 7 days.

I found the Bible I have chosen to use to be:

- ___ very easy to use and understand
- ___ somewhat easy to use and understand
- ___ somewhat hard to use and understand (consider trying for another week)
- ___ very hard to use and understand (consider choosing another Bible)

I found the devotional resources I have chosen to be:

- ___ a good match for me. Something that speaks to my heart’s desire
- ___ okay, by not compelling (consider trying for another week)
- ___ not a good match for me (consider looking for another resource)

The part of my daily devotional time that came the easiest (or that I enjoyed the most) was:

The part of my daily devotional time that came the hardest (or that I disliked the most) was:

One thing I plan to change or revise about my plan for personal devotions is:

Since I began making time for God I have learned/discovered:

(To be completed after the first thirty days since you started.)

This month I was able to set aside time for personal devotions on ___ of 30 days.

Now that personal devotional time has become a daily habit for me, I commit to:

- ___ increase my devotional time to ___ minutes
- ___ change my pattern for choosing Bible readings to: _____
- ___ change my pattern for reflection to: _____
- ___ change my pattern for prayer to: _____
- ___ maintain the same pattern for personal devotions

OR (if you are still struggling with making personal devotions a daily habit)

To improve the likelihood that I find time every day for personal devotions, I will:

- ___ choose a better time of day (or be more flexible about time of day)
- ___ choose different devotional resources
- ___ seek help from a fellow Christian who practices daily devotional time



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