

52 WAYS TO GROW YOUR FAITH

will do what it says AND give you freedom.

Your spiritual growth strategy does not have to be limited to reading and praying. Try growing spiritually while walking, driving, or working out. *52 Ways to Grow Your Faith* will jump-start a stalled faith, provide a road map for a new faith, or simply energize an active faith. Use this resource with friends in a weekly study group or on your own – but get ready to grow and connect with God in a busy, noisy world.

EACH CHAPTER INCLUDES

- Spiritual growth idea and explanation
- Key verse (the Bible's connection)
- Devotion (life's connection)
- Quote (sometimes humorous, always thoughtful)
- Try It (tip for application)
- I Tried It! (real people, real stories)
- Prayer

"The '52 Series' is both practical and helpful. It's a great resource for Christians of all spiritual levels, but perfect for groups focused on new or growing believers."

- **Mark Batterson, Pastor & Author, *The Circle Maker***

"I love the '52 Series.' Gregg has made spiritual growth accessible to everyone. Well done!"

- **Doug Fields, Author, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry & Refuel***



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Carpenter's Son Publishing



gregg peter farah

52 Ways to Grow Your Faith

THE 52 SERIES

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CONNECT WITH GOD IN
A BUSY, NOISY WORLD

52 Ways to
Grow Your
Faith



What others are saying about The 52 Series . . .

“Gregg’s ‘52 Series’ is both practical and helpful. It’s a great resource for Christians of all spiritual levels, but perfect for groups focused on new or growing believers. Gregg’s books are thoughtful, practical, and make learning fun.”

Mark Batterson, *Author, The Circle Maker and Wild Goose Chase*

“Our church has invested lots of time and prayer helping people become devoted followers of Christ. We are not interested in merely providing a nice church experience. We want to see people of all spiritual interest levels move forward and grow in their journey of faith. Gregg’s ‘52 Series’ is a catalytic resource that encourages movement toward Christ. You’ll benefit working through them on your own, but they’re even better when shared with a group.”

Greg Hawkins, *Executive Pastor, Willow Creek Community Church; Author of Move*

“Finally, a spiritual growth series that not only helps me grow but is also informative and fun. I love that it’s something I look forward to reading, can use it with my small group, and feel comfortable sharing it with my friends who have little (but some) spiritual interest. Gregg’s ‘52 Series’ has made spiritual growth accessible to everyone. Well done!”

Doug Fields, *Author, Purpose Driven Youth Ministry & Refuel*

“One of the biggest voids in the church is having quality resources which move a new believer toward spiritual maturity. Gregg Farah has both the burden and knack for filling that gap. This series will deepen you in your walk with Christ.”

Dave Stone, *Pastor of Southeast Christian Church*

“Many believers want to grow in their faith, yet seem to get stuck on where to start and how to keep going. Gregg Farah has written a series out of his experiences of mentoring believers that give practical ways to help us grow. There are so many times that one small step opens the door to significant life change. By offering 52 ideas, this series will help you to discover those steps that God best uses as he works in you to grow you. I highly recommend studying this in a small group, because your faith will be strengthened as you see how God works in different ways to grow us.”

Tom Holladay, *Teaching Pastor at Saddleback Church;
Author of The Relationship Principles of Jesus*

“Gregg Farah’s 52 Series takes the busy ‘city’ place inside of us – that restless part that’s landlocked between the skyscrapers of our demanding schedule, unmet expectations and our God issues – and invites us to stop, breathe and best of all, ‘look up.’”

Stacey Robbins, *Author, Finding the Missing Peace: Stories from Hell, Heaven and the Other Side of Texas*

“As a teacher, student, and practitioner of the faith, Gregg Farah has developed a very creative and relevant approach to discipleship in the “52 Series.” This series is a must for churches with a small group ministry searching for effective curriculum!”

Bil Cornelius, *Pastor of Bay Area Fellowship; Author of
I Dare You to Change and Go Big*

“I love what Gregg has done with the ‘52 Series.’ It’s not easy finding resources that work for new and seasoned believers, but Gregg has done it. Each chapter is short and to the point, so they don’t intimidate. But the chapters are clear and filled with enough features that they engage people wherever they’re at. Great job, Gregg!”

Josh Griffin, *Saddleback Church Pastor, Author of 99
Thoughts for Small Group Leaders and More Than
Dodgeball*

“What I enjoy most about Gregg Farah’s ‘52 Series’ is that I can give the books to anyone in our church. New Christians get their questions answered, and mature Christians get a refresher course and have a terrific tool to disciple others. Gregg does a masterful job getting people to think and dialogue, apply the Bible to their lives, and have fun in the process.”

Beau Adams, *Pastor of Community Bible Church*

“With uncommon skill and heart, Gregg Farah has crafted a resource you’ll go to again and again. Not only does *The 52 Series* fill a sparse space in the church resource library, it makes growth and life-change accessible to anyone—anyone! If you’re hungry, God’s word is the means to your fill, and Gregg serves it up in hearty portions.”

Michele Cushatt, *Inspirational speaker at notable venues such as Women of Faith and Compassion International and contributing author for numerous publications including MOPS International and Today’s Christian Woman, and multiple compilation books including five titles in the Chicken Soup series.*

52

Ways to Grow Your Faith

Connect with God in a
Busy, Noisy World

gregg peter farah



Carpenter's Son Publishing

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52 Ways to Grow Your Faith: Connect with God in a Busy, Noisy World

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*To Janine, my bride, the most amazing woman in
the world. Thank you for loving me and showing
me what a life committed to Jesus looks like.
Thank you for saying "I Do."*

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Introduction: The Importance of This Book

Good news! Comedian George Carlin once reported that scientists had found a cure for apathy. However, Carlin said, no one showed the slightest bit of interest in it.

It might appear that's not good news after all, except for the fact that you're reading this book. You're not apathetic about your spiritual growth. You want to grow spiritually, and you're doing something about it. That's good, and that's healthy. But, if you're like me, you might be a bit intimidated. I've been motivated to do other things in the past, without success. I've set goals, I've purchased equipment, I've publicly declared my intentions . . . only to revise my goals, return the equipment, and ultimately avoid everyone I told. And because it's not easy to make an entirely new set of friends, I end up eating yet another slice of humble pie and try not to get excited about anything . . . ever again.

But we can't live that way. Especially when it comes to life with God and pursuing all God has for us. Look at what the apostle Paul teaches:

Let your roots grow down into Christ and draw up nourishment from Him. See that you go on growing in the Lord, and become strong and vigorous in the faith" (Colossians 2:7, *Living Bible*).

Strength and vigor anyone? I'm in. I'd love to have my faith described that way. And I'd relish the opportunity to know God and the Bible intimately. Yet despite my good intentions, I end up frustrated and assume "spiritual giant" status isn't for me.

That's the day I took a walk. And on that walk I saw a sunset that nearly dropped me to my knees. I was humbled by the beauty God created and the power in it. I pulled out my phone and did a Bible search on the words "God" and "beauty" and found Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

It described my feeling exactly. I wanted to run and tell others about what I was seeing. I wanted everyone to slow down and stop walking, stop talking, stop texting, and LOOK. I wanted people to observe God’s power and beauty and declare, “Your God reigns!”

And that’s when I realized I had gotten more out of a five-minute encounter with God than an earlier 20-minutes of quiet time.

It’s important to note that I advocate time alone with God, Bible reading, and prayer. But I know too many people who have given up growing deeper with God because they have trouble reading the Bible and are easily distracted in prayer. That’s what this book is about! Anyone can grow spiritually. *Anyone*. You don’t have to have an advanced degree or the latest gadget or another book (except this one . . . smile).

In fact, **All You Need . . .**

To Grow on Your Own . . .

1. is to look around
2. is to look up
3. is a computer or library card (or support for your local bookstore)
4. is to find a quiet place

To Grow with a Friend . . .

5. is a friend (and a bit of courage)

6. is a meeting time and a book
7. is to ask a question
8. is to learn from the fallen
9. is conviction and a smile
10. is your story
11. is to remember
12. is to share the news

To Grow with a Group . . .

13. is a commitment to go
14. is to remember who your audience is
15. is to be part of a family
16. is a friend to help you lead
17. is an open door
18. is to arrive early (or stay late)
19. is some popcorn
20. is to pop your bubble

To Grow on the Go . . .

21. is an appointment
22. is a map
23. is a good pair of shoes
24. is a plane ticket
25. is to take a drive

To Grow Methodically . . .

26. is an index card (or your phone)
27. is another index card (or your phone)
28. is an alarm
29. is a plan
30. is to slow down
31. is a calendar
32. is some discipline
33. is a willingness to be humbled

34. is a willingness to learn (and maybe a notebook)

To Grow Courageously . . .

- 35. is a little courage
- 36. is to stop and say hello
- 37. is the combination
- 38. is the freedom to fail
- 39. is a commitment to teach
- 40. is nothing
- 41. is to be a thrill-seeker
- 42. is a passport

To Grow Artistically . . .

- 43. are some invitations
- 44. are some markers
- 45. are some good headphones (cheap ones work, too)
- 46. is a ticket
- 47. is to borrow a church hymnal
- 48. is a love for learning

More . . . Grow on Your Own . . .

- 49. is to believe God
- 50. is a notebook
- 51. is a shower . . . or a car . . . or the woods . . . or a carefree attitude
- 52. is to stop and pray . . . immediately

I'll be the first to admit that a number of these ideas, while in one of the eight sections, easily could be in another of the groups, or even in both. (For instance, I placed the one about growing by drawing your faith in "artistically," but certainly, that could be one in which you grow on your own or with others.) So feel free to move these ideas around in your own mind and make up your own categorizations if it helps. Heck, create a new category, one I

didn't come up with for this book!

You can go through these ideas on your own, but I encourage you to grab some friends and a cup of coffee and begin talking through these together. Certainly you can try each idea one at a time . . . one week at a time . . . or any length of time you want. I suggest you meet with a group of friends and do one of the following:

- 1) One person selects a spiritual growth idea for the group and everyone practices it for a week. Reconvene a week later and discuss it. And then the next person selects an idea, and so on.
- 2) Each person in the group selects an idea (more than one person can choose the same one) and practices it for the week. Reconvene the following week to discuss it and then select another idea.

Decide to do this for four, six, eight, or any amount of weeks. And while it's important to debrief each week, take advantage of the opportunity to dialogue with one another as often as you can.

*Want **more ideas** on how to use this book with groups or as a class? See page 213 for numerous ways to do this, including sample studies and a lesson template.*

Spiritual growth is for everyone. All you need . . . is to get started. J.I. Packer reminds us that those who know God have great thoughts of God.¹ May our minds be filled with the wonder of God, and let that motivate us to love and serve God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

Each chapter includes

Spiritual growth idea and explanation

Key verse (the Bible's connection)

Devotion (life's connection)

Key Quote (sometimes humorous, always thoughtful)

Try It (tip for application)

I Tried It! (real people, real stories)

Prayer

Grow on Your Own

One

All You Need Is ... TO LOOK AROUND

Develop the habit of praying about anything that catches your attention throughout the day.

- Is someone having a birthday party at a restaurant table near yours? Breathe a silent prayer for the birthday boy/girl.
- Did an emergency vehicle race by? Ask God to protect those in crisis.
- Did your child offer a hug? Thank God for the blessing of parenthood.

KEY VERSE

Pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NCV).

Lesson Learned (Still Learning . . .)

When the apostle Paul exhorts us to “pray continually,” he’s talking about a lifestyle decision. I remember a time several years ago when I groaned in frustration as our car inched along the highway in bumper-to-bumper traffic. I was annoyed at yet another inconvenience to my schedule. I shook my head in frustration, knowing the intensity of the traffic was the result of gawking rubberneckers, each straining to see all they could.

As I approached the scene of the accident, I did all I could to force my eyes forward, not wanting to contribute to the slow pace on the road. But I couldn't resist. I "oohed" and "ahhhd," noticing tearful passengers sitting beside one another on the damaged guardrail. As I steered away from the shattered glass over the road, I tried to do a quick count of the numerous emergency vehicles. I hate to sound callous, but it was an impressive accident. It looked like everyone survived, but I could not get the image of destruction out of my head.

As lanes of traffic quickly opened before us and I was able to again reach the speed limit—slightly over it, actually—I looked in my rear-view mirror at my daughter while saying, "Wow. That was some accident, huh?" I didn't get a reply, so after a quick glance at the road, I looked in the rear-view mirror again.

"Sweetie? You OK?"

"Yes, Dad. I was just praying for the people. They looked sad, and I asked God to help them."

It took a minute for me to respond. My mind raced back to my frustration sitting in traffic, followed by my collision curiosity. While I thought of myself, my daughter thought of the people and their pain. I saw the people, but my daughter saw their need.

Today's idea may seem trivial—praying for what we see?—but pausing to pray can revolutionize our lives. If we can develop a heart for prayer, with eyes that see people and situations as God sees them, we will grow spiritual depth.

KEY QUOTE

"There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it."² — Brother Lawrence

TRY IT

Ask a friend to join you this week, and keep track of how many

people and things you pray for during a two-to-three day period. Then meet and talk about the experience. Did it become easier to pray over time?

I TRIED IT!

Althea, teenager, about herself: "I like tennis and mint chocolate chip ice cream."

"I liked the idea when I first read it. I thought it would be a good experience, so I tried it. One day while in the city, I caught myself just praying for people I passed on the street. I remember this homeless guy, and I found myself praying for him. I prayed for so many things for this one guy. It made me realize I should be caring for other people, not only myself. This experience really opened my eyes!"

PRAYER

"God, I know you are at work in my life and in those around me. Help me see what you are doing and to be a person of prayer.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Two

All You Need Is . . . TO LOOK UP

Live in a city or metropolitan area? Look up! Pick a high-rise building and let your eyes travel up from the first floor to the roof and beyond. Since the buildings point toward Heaven, let them remind you of God's presence in your life and the city. Live in the country? Look up at the vast sky, and remember that God is big and able to help you through your day. Take a moment to thank God for who he is and all that he's doing in your life and in those around you.

KEY VERSE

But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if my followers didn't say these things, then the stones would cry out" (Luke 19:40, NCV).

Keep Looking Up

I've lived in several apartment buildings of varying heights: I've lived on the sixth floor, eighth floor, 16th floor, and 23rd floor. All of these provided terrific views, especially apartment 23-S, our two-bedroom home in Lower Manhattan that overlooked the Hudson River and Statue of Liberty. On occasion, I would try to identify our apartment for a friend on street level, and the easiest

way to do so was to count up from floor one—or to count down from the top floor.

I realized, however, that this tactic limited my vision to the building itself, without an awareness of what was going on above or around the building. It is also easy to lose your place when counting 23 floors—they start to blur together without proper focus.

The same can be said about events in our lives. When we face a crisis or are overwhelmed by a challenge, we tend to focus all of our energy on that immediate need, a reasonable response. But sometimes we need more than focus; we need perspective. It helps to step back, or have a friend pull us back, to evaluate the situation from a different perspective and angle. Sometimes we need to catch our breath. Other times, we just need a new view.

Once, when pointing out my apartment to a visiting family member, I was distracted by a waving flag from a window a few floors above. When I shifted my eyes to that window, I noticed colored lights strung across a different window a few floors higher. That observation then led me to identify a graffiti stripe even higher on the building. I hadn't made these observations before, despite the fact that they were above my head the entire time. The same is true with God. Sometimes we need to force ourselves to look up, even when our circumstances demand so much of our attention. So when you come across a tall building or drive across a valley, take time to look up and remember that regardless of how important we think we may be, or how small we may feel, we are not as powerful as God, nor are we insignificant. Look up!

KEY QUOTE

"If the works of God could easily be grasped by human understanding, they could not be called wonderful or too great for words."³ — Thomas à Kempis

TRY IT

Go to your favorite building or natural “high-rise” landmark. Slowly move your eyes up the building/mountain/valley, etc., as you think about a challenge you are facing. When you get to the top with your eyes, take time to pray to God about the challenge, asking for his guidance and wisdom.

Through the rest of this week, let any building or object that makes you look up serve as a reminder to pause and pray for the situation as you look heavenward.

I TRIED IT!

Cassidy, teenager, about herself: “I have four sisters and am part of two sets of twins.”

“I spent an hour looking at nature, and it reminded me of God’s power and beauty. I sat at the beach and imagined Jesus walking on water. It gave me perspective, reminding me that God’s power is available to me.”

PRAYER

“God, it’s hard to think about you throughout the day. Help me stay connected and use my surroundings to remind me of you.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Three

All You Need Is . . . A COMPUTER OR LIBRARY CARD (OR SUPPORT FOR YOUR LOCAL BOOKSTORE)

If you were alive in the early 1990s, Amazon.com did not exist. Then in 1994, Jeff Bezos parked his car on the street and used a garage to launch what has become the largest e-tailer in the world. Amazon’s web sales in 2010 were five times those of Walmart, Target, and Buy.com *combined*. Guess what? They likely have a book or two (million) that you not only will enjoy but also will help you grow spiritually.

KEY VERSE

Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are my constant guide (Psalm 119:98, NLT).

Wake Up Call

I am finishing Billy Graham’s autobiography, *Just As I Am*. I looked forward to learning more about one of America’s preeminent evangelists. What I wasn’t prepared for is how it moved me to pray.

I was inspired by Graham and his team’s commitment to pray,

whenever it was and wherever they were, even when it required waking people up. Graham told the story of being overseas and waking up in the early morning hours on the day that a crusade was to begin. He felt compelled to pray, but he was so overwhelmed that he needed some prayer partners. So at 2 AM, he woke up his wife and went across the hall of the hotel to wake up his colleague and his colleague's wife so they could pray with him. I'm not sure how I would've felt about that if I were the one being awakened, but I was inspired by this story. Reading this and many other stories of time spent in faith-filled prayer moved me to begin a self-created 40 Days of Prayer journey.

I committed to pray for one hour a day for 40 consecutive days. While it actually took me 58 days to complete (I slowed down once I hit the 30s), I learned a lot about myself and the priority of prayer. More than that, I realized I did not previously pray as much as I thought, so this was a good challenge and one that helped me refocus.

KEY QUOTE

"I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book."⁴ — Groucho Marx

TRY IT

- Did you know many libraries loan e-books, so you can read on your Kindle or other e-reader?
- When was the last time you were at a library? Because they're publicly funded institutions, their collections vary. Take a stroll through your library. You'll likely find something that interests you.
- Find someone whose walk with Christ you respect. Ask him or her for the names of two to three books that have helped them grow spiritually.
- Besides Amazon.com, try Christianbook.com.

- If you're fortunate enough to have a Christian bookstore in your area, give it a visit.

I TRIED IT!

Jim, 50-something, about himself: "I'm a minister, retired Navy veteran, and father of four sons—all of whom faithfully serve God today (though I didn't always think that would happen!)."

"I try to read a number of books every year. But there are four types of books I make sure I read every year: One on parenting, one on marriage to help my marriage, one on leadership, and one on discipleship. The marriage one makes my wife feel secure. The others? They make *me* feel more secure."

PRAYER

"God, help me develop the discipline to be a reader, and help me develop the discernment I need when reading. Keep me teachable and hungry for knowing you.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Four

All You Need Is . . . TO FIND A QUIET PLACE

Retreat locally. Find a place of refuge in the community in which you live where you can be still. There's power in solitude, and finding your own "sacred" spot will bring peace to your soul and mind. If possible, find an area where people won't easily identify you. It's easier to be still when you're not getting interrupted. Use your time to read, pray, journal, or just close your eyes and sit.

KEY VERSE

He went to a lonely place, where he prayed (Mark 1:35, NCV).

Some Faces Make Us Sick. So What We Need Is to . . .

Bible teacher, evangelist, and publisher Dwight L. Moody said, "We ought to see the face of God every morning before we see the face of man."⁵ Wise counsel, particularly when some faces make me sick. I agree; that's not the kindest statement. In fact, it probably wouldn't make the "Top One Million Nicest Things to Say" list. But it is honest and all the more reason we ought to heed Mr. Moody's advice.

God has called us to love him and to love our neighbor. It's easy loving your neighbor when you don't have any, or when

your neighbor likes to bake and share, but it's not as easy when your colleague (classified as "neighbor"—there's no workaround here) drives you crazy. I have a friend who literally feels sick in his stomach when he pulls into the parking lot and sees his coworker's car. I've never thought to ask why he'd expect not to see his car for fear of hearing of some murderous plot I'd be obligated to report. Nonetheless, my friend does not like the man on the other side of his cubicle.

There's a high probability a name or two (or dozen?) come to mind when you think of job transfers you'd like to submit, but a better use of our time would be spent learning to fulfill God's great commandment of loving our neighbor as ourselves. One way to do so is to take time to pray, focused time where we look to God for help, but also a time where we sit in silence to hear from him. While it is wise to spend predetermined time with God each day, we all need a place to escape, to catch our breath, and to refocus on what matters most. And it might encourage you that seeking solitude is neither a plan of escape nor a pop psychology fad. It's a biblical teaching modeled by Jesus. In addition to today's Key Verse, there are 19 other times the Bible describes Jesus withdrawing to be alone with His Father. Jesus certainly had a significant job description—Savior of the world—with people to see and things to do. But he was quick to withdraw to be alone with his Father when necessary.

Is there a face you can think of that you don't care for? Take a moment to pray for him or her, and pray for a chance to serve this person. And remember, you don't need to live in frustration: find a place to go, to be alone with God, when you need encouragement to do the right thing. It's not easy loving people who seem unlovable, but it is important.

Hey, maybe that last line would make that Top One Million List.

KEY QUOTE

“Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens, we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.”⁶ — André Gide

TRY IT

Finding the ideal local retreat location can vary depending on your geography and personality. I love the city, and yet I can find quiet spots within the hustle and bustle of what some would deem metropolitan madness. But I have friends who break out in hives at the mention of going into the city. I also have friends who love city life but still need quiet or some view of nature in order to truly retreat.

You may instantly know the right place for you, but if not, give it time. Over the next week or two, pay attention to how you feel when you are at certain locations. When walking your dog through the park, do you feel calm? While purchasing coffee from your favorite cafe, do the smells and music soothe your soul? Retreat centers are typically identified as out-of-the-way locations, but a local retreat needs to be easily accessible, so don't worry about finding the perfect place. Find a location that helps you take consecutive deep breaths.

I TRIED IT!

Rebecca, teenager, about herself: “I like to play guitar, and my favorite sports are tennis, basketball, and lacrosse.”

“Finding a place of my own with no distractions was hard at first. I kept thinking to myself, ‘Where in the world can I go with no distractions?’ Once I found my place, it was amazing. I love the outdoors and I love music, so I put those together and found a quiet place outside where I can listen to music while reading my Bible and talking to God. The experience was amazing. I could feel God sitting there beside me. It was nice, quiet, and peaceful.”

PRAYER

“God, help me be still before you to collect my thoughts and to redirect my focus and energy toward you.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Grow with a Friend

Five

All You Need Is . . . A FRIEND (AND A BIT OF COURAGE)

Ask a friend to contact you during the day to follow up on a goal you want to accomplish. It's easy to get inspired to take action . . . but follow-through can be tough. If something is meaningful to you, ask a friend to hold you accountable—and then get to it.

KEY VERSE

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up (Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10).

Frozen—But Determined

Sweat formed on Nick's upper lip, despite the winter temperature. He looked at the neon sign on the corner, blinking rhythmically as if a coded message were luring him in. He walked quickly past and could hear muffled laughter. He thought he recognized the voice of a friend, forcing him to stop and smile. Was he telling the same joke from last week? Nick smiled and kept walking. But what if it were a new joke? Nick knew all of his jokes. He didn't want to be left out. And in that moment he turned back toward the door, and

then stopped, licking the drop of sweat that slid down the right side of his mouth. His hands were deep in the pockets of his winter coat, his right hand feeling the keys against the back of his palm, and his left hand clutching his phone so tight he had to let go for fear he'd break it.

That's when I got the call. "You want to hang out?" Nick asked. "I'm in front of the bar, and I don't want to do this again. I've come a long way, but I can't get rid of this desire. What can I do?"

That phone call was the beginning of a new journey for Nick, sober for 412 days as of the day I wrote this. During his first 90 days, we were on the phone a lot, or together a lot. And while it has been an incredible journey for Nick, it has been meaningful for me, too. I've learned plenty about addiction over the last year and even more on the common traps that haunt alcoholics. But more than anything, I've learned far more about myself and the power of friendship. I've always been an advocate for transparency in relationships, especially close ones. And my interaction with Nick has solidified that belief.

It was Nick's will to succeed, however, that truly gripped me.

Nick had a look in his eyes that said, "I'm committed to win, but I'm desperate for help." That look haunted me. The hunger I saw in his eyes isn't something I'd seen in my own life. I came to realize I wasn't as open to my friends as I thought. I was ready to listen and encourage friends who sought help, but I never reciprocated. Deep down, I felt I could accomplish goals on my own, despite my ongoing struggles.

I'm finally feeling frozen, stuck. But I'm going to change. At least that's my plan. I really need to tell someone.

KEY QUOTE

"We go farther, faster, when we go together."⁷ — The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

TRY IT

Your greatest temptation will be to tell your friend only what you think he wants to hear. You've got to be brutally honest. Sometimes the truth hurts, but if you're asking for accountability to complete a project or overcome a temptation, do yourself a huge favor—don't cheat the process.

I TRIED IT!

Ronnie, 20-something, about himself: "I've never broken a bone, but I am allergic to pineapple." (OK, yes. Ronnie is a bit of a, shall we say, interesting friend.)

"I asked friends to help keep me sober by spending time with me in the early days of my quitting drugs and alcohol. This helped tremendously because, when it would get really difficult, I could be honest with my friends. And even though I tried, it was impossible to convince whomever I was with at the time to let me to drink or get any type of drug."

PRAYER

"Thank You, God, for being with me. While I ask for your help, give me the courage to share my goal with a friend.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Six

All You Need Is . . . A MEETING TIME AND A BOOK

An African proverb says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Although I’m an introvert who gets recharged by alone time, I thrive on accountability and routine. If you want to grow in your faith, be willing to meet regularly with a friend to discuss what you’re learning as you read your Bible or another Christian book. And if you’re not reading your Bible or a quality Christian book, this is the perfect time to begin.

KEY VERSE

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. (Colossians 3:16).

When Two or More . . .

Have you ever done the three-legged race? How about the wheelbarrow race? Are you an egg toss veteran? I love the egg toss and just about any outside party game. And even though I don’t win consistently, I do enjoy myself each and every time. I’ve seen lots of pictures and videos of people laughing and high-fiving

before, during, and after races. And even when someone chooses not to participate, you can find a smile on their face as they laugh and cheer.

All of the games I mentioned require a partner. You’d have to be a fast runner to successfully toss an egg back and forth at an increasing distance each time. And I’m not sure how you’d pull off the wheelbarrow or 3-legged race on your own. There’s something significant and memorable about spending time together. It feeds our souls, lifts our spirits, and creates memories. Caution: some of those memories may include an embarrassing detail or two.

I’m grateful for my spiritual growth memories, too. While I can think of several that happened in a quiet time of personal reflection, the vast majority includes being with a group of friends challenging one another’s faith, beliefs, and actions. I’ve met in homes, coffee shops, cars, over the phone, and even in the middle of a crowded university walkway. The place may vary, but the goal remains the same: getting together to help each other grow spiritually—to be the people God wants us to be.

Grab a book and a friend, and enjoy learning about God and life together.

KEY QUOTE

“All human beings should try to learn, before they die, what they are running from, and to, and why.”⁸ — James Thurber

TRY IT

Coordinating schedules with another person—especially a group of people—is tough, but it’s not impossible. Besides planning on a meeting in the evening or a weekend, try before work or immediately after work or school. How about between classes or while your kids are at practice? You can even do an online chat at home in your pajamas.

Get creative. Get personal. Get going!

I TRIED IT!

David, 50-something, about himself: “I have the 1928 Ford Model A that belonged to my dad, and I smoke a mean pork butt.” (Confession: I have no idea what a pork butt is or how to smoke it, but how could I not include this factoid? Definitely interesting.)

“This idea reminded me of my most powerful times of spiritual growth. I think of myself as a solitary person, yet when it comes to my faith, I have found I can’t get there alone! God’s fast lane for spiritual growth for me has always included other people. I have seen some amazing things happen as I gave up a little time to join or start a group to study together. Not only has my faith and understanding of God jumped ahead, but I also have been rewarded with the best friends in my whole life!”

PRAYER

“God, I thank you for the Bible and the wisdom you give to writers. Give me not only the discipline to be an ongoing learner, but also the wisdom to open my life to others in order to learn from them.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Seven

All You Need Is ... TO ASK A QUESTION

Do you know people whose spiritual lives impress you? Have they said something or responded a certain way which made you curious? Whether you like coffee or not, invite him/her/them out to discuss ways they are growing spiritually. Heck, if you don’t like coffee, have a soda. In short, interview your friend. Use the wealth of wisdom and experience around you to learn all you can. No one is perfect, but we can always find people who are closer to where we want to be.

KEY VERSE

Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained by living a godly life (Proverbs 16:31, NLT).

Speechless

I tried to talk; really, I did. I also tried to act natural, but considering I was unable to get air into my lungs, I’m convinced the look of horror on his face meant I was not acting naturally. Of course, it is possible his fearful expression was the result of seeing a spider behind me or remembering he left overdue library books at home. But my best guess is that he was witnessing a grown man

about to pass out, and he didn't know what to do.

It all started humbly. I was dropping my wife off at work when I noticed author Steve Farrar walking across the parking lot. Without hesitating, I set the emergency brake, jumped out of my car, and mumbled something to my wife as I ran to catch up with him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Farrar?" I asked, trying to catch my breath after the quick sprint from the car and up the building's stairs. "Yes?" he asked. Wow! It was him. Steve Farrar wrote a book called *Point Man* that significantly impacted my thinking on what it meant to be a man, husband, and father. I read and reread many sections of that book, underlining phrases and writing questions in the margins. And now, I had the opportunity to ask one of those questions.

But I couldn't speak. More importantly, I couldn't breathe.

I stood before Mr. Farrar, completely starstruck. When I began to catch my breath, his fearful expression moved to one of relief and finally morphed into sympathy. He tried to break the ice by asking my name . . . but between gasps, the best I could utter was, "Thank you for your book." And then I turned and walked out.

I remember walking slowly back to the car, shaking my head in disbelief and noticing the line of cars behind mine, which blocked the circular driveway. With my breath now self-regulated, I drove around the driveway to allow others cars to drop off their passengers while I explained what happened to my wife. We both had a good laugh, and she promised she would not mention any of this to her colleagues, whom, I was certain, caught at least a glimpse of my near medical emergency.

The point of sharing this story? Two things:

- 1) Celebrities are regular people. No need to get choked up.
- 2) Take advantage of opportunities you have to talk to people who inspire you. It's highly probable there are friends or colleagues or people in your church who would have much wisdom to offer . . . if you ask them.

KEY QUOTE

"Millions saw the apple fall, but Newton asked why."⁹ — Bernard Baruch

TRY IT

Make a list of the top skills you want to develop or knowledge you want to obtain. Then with others, brainstorm the names of individuals who can help you learn what you hope to know. While it's great to have a "dream list" of people you could interview, be sure to include plenty of realistic names and then begin inviting each out for coffee to pick their brains.

I TRIED IT!

Danielle, 30-something, about herself: "I love playing volleyball and eating mint chocolate chip ice cream."

"I have a few special friends who inspire me a lot. I seek their wisdom as a mom (they have seven children between them), because their parenting style encourages me to be the best mom I can be. I look forward to our time together because I always come away feeling energized and empowered to face whatever challenge I'm encountering."

PRAYER

"God, thank you for all the wisdom in the world, and thank you for helping me realize I don't have all of it. Besides going to you for direction in life, point me toward the people who can help me learn what I need to know.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Eight

All You Need Is . . . TO LEARN FROM THE FALLEN

Unfortunately, there's another realm of interviews to be performed, and while this one isn't as exciting, it might be the most valuable. Interview those who have failed in some capacity: legally, relationally, professionally, or in other ways. As long as the person is willing to talk, he or she will have a wealth of wisdom to impart.

KEY VERSE

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13).

Life Lessons

The Christian community abounds in failure. A quick Internet search featuring keywords like "Christian," "moral," "failure," "exposed," "pastor," and other similar words can be depressing. One perspective would understand these failures this way: we are fallen people in need of a Savior. Another perspective would resent these stories: we are a redeemed people, empowered to live by our Savior.

Regardless of your position, there's another consideration that

is significant when it comes to spiritual growth: the response of a Christian who fails. I think we have much to learn from other Christians who have failed in their faith, yet have been quick to repent. Their faith is a renewed faith, one with greater depth and often greater intimacy with Jesus.

Consider two examples:

This Christian leader was known throughout his community as a faithful follower, quick to point others toward Jesus and affirm his faith proudly. Yet when a crisis arose within his ministry, he not only stopped speaking up for Jesus—he flat out denied him.

Another Christian leader voiced his love and admiration for God so prominently that he was openly criticized. He responded to his critics with a further declaration of his commitment to his God. Yet this same Christian leader was later found guilty of adultery.

Unfortunately, in our modern era, many individuals could fit the above descriptions, yet they describe our biblical heroes Peter and King David, respectively. These two men not only repented but also went on to lead unparalleled lives of devotion to God that produced an abundance of fruit. Their testimony includes a tenderness toward God that is only experienced from a season of humility. There are men and women in our churches who have much to teach us from their mistakes. Approach them with a sympathetic heart, and ask them to share all they have learned. Their lessons may be the most poignant ones for your next steps of spiritual growth.

KEY QUOTE

"Never confuse a single defeat with a final defeat."¹⁰ — F. Scott Fitzgerald

TRY IT

Some great books to consider reading that relate to this topic:

- *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, Gordon MacDonald

- *Failing Forward*, John Maxwell
- *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, John Ortberg
- *Moses*, Charles Swindoll
- *David*, Charles Swindoll
- *The Land Between*, Jeff Manion
- *It*, Craig Groeschel
- *Redeeming Love*, Francine Rivers
- *Born Again*, Charles Colson
- *Beyond Belief*, Josh Hamilton

I TRIED IT!

Peter, 40-something, about himself: "I like to put saltines in my bowl of ice cream."

"I attended a Q&A session at a retreat with a man who had been arrested for hiring a prostitute. I went more out of a curiosity, because he was a professional athlete, but I came away with a deep conviction on the priority of purity and not justifying even the smallest amount of sin. I'm glad I went, and I'm especially glad he was willing to share his story."

PRAYER

"God, protect me from pride in ever looking down on other people because of their sin. Keep me sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading in my life, and give me grace in responding to others."

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Nine

All You Need Is . . . CONVICTION AND A SMILE

It takes courage and conviction to speak truth to a friend. But that's what a friend does. A friend also has a heart, however. Don't berate your friend for having sin in his life that he's struggling with. Lovingly redirect him . . . with a smile. Take time to pray for wisdom in how and when to approach your friend, and pray for him as well, that he would be open to hearing what you have to say.

KEY VERSE

For as long as it's still God's Today, keep each other on your toes so sin doesn't slow down your reflexes (Hebrews 3:13, Msg).

Would You Rather . . . ?

There's not necessarily a right or wrong answer to these questions. But they are worth considering.

Would you rather have lots of people in your life to hang out with . . . or one friend to do life with?

Would you rather have lots of people say things you want to hear . . . or a few friends say things you need to hear?

Would you rather have 100 people in your life who might help you when you have a need . . . or two friends you *know* would be

there for you?

Would you rather avoid tough issues so you didn't have to hurt anyone's feelings . . . or say the hard thing to a friend you care about?

Would you rather be the center of attention in a room full of people who will forget you in a few days . . . or sit with one friend in a room full of people who ignore you?

Would you rather have people in your life who ignore the "secret sins" in your life . . . or one friend who calls you out when you need it?

Would you rather laugh with a group of people you'll never get to know deeply . . . or cry with a friend?

Would you rather pretend everything is fine in your life around a group of people who look up to you . . . or confess your need for help to a few friends?

Would you rather these questions end and just move on . . . or spend a bit more time thinking about the people in your life?

KEY QUOTE

"Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light."¹¹ — Helen Keller

TRY IT

I'm a people-pleaser by nature, so confrontation does not come naturally. I am committed to my friends, however, and will do whatever is in their best interest, even when that requires confrontation. The best thing you can do is decide what kind of friend you want to be. That commitment will determine whether you can speak the truth in love.

I TRIED IT!

Carol, 40-something, about herself: "My second toe is longer than my big toe, which makes shoe shopping quite interesting!"

"This has always been a tough line for me to walk, as my concern

for a girlfriend's choices or behavior can be taken as judgmental or opinionated. However, I've found when I ask God to check my motives, He reveals if I'm off track. And when I have spoken with a friend, even though there have been some uncomfortable moments, it's always been worth it. My friendships have grown deeper through difficult times."

PRAYER

"God, I know being a true friend requires me to say the hard thing at times, so give me courage to do so in a loving way. But help me to receive the hard truths that I need to hear, too.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Ten

All You Need Is . . . YOUR STORY

Sometimes we hear stories of miraculous ways God has moved in people's lives. And while we're inspired by those stories, we can be easily discouraged as well, because we don't think our story matches up. Well, I think it's time to stop comparing your story with another's and simply share what God has done and is doing in your life. Your story matters—even if it doesn't make people cry. One great way to grow in your faith is simply to review what God has done and to articulate it to a friend in a simple way.

KEY VERSE

“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25, ESV).

Chapter by Chapter

My story is not finished. It's still being written. But I have definite scenes that stand out.

I remember lying in bed, nearly a teen, fearful of what the future held. I was taught in school that good people went to heaven and bad people didn't. Despite the fact that my family considered me “a good kid,” I knew in my heart I wasn't good enough. *But how*

good is good enough?

I remember sitting on the floor in Glenn's room as a sophomore in high school, doing a Bible study with our youth pastor, Doug. I truthfully don't remember any spiritual content from the study, but I do remember laughing and talking and feeling good about my decision to be in the Bible study. Although I didn't know much about the Bible or God, I knew both were important.

I remember sitting in a chair at Danbury High School's auditorium for a youth group event. It was a comedy show, and the comic shifted gears and began sharing his story. The lights came on. Everything Doug had taught me previously at youth group and in the Bible study at Glenn's house suddenly made sense. I remember wanting to go forward, as invited by the speaker, in order to give my life to Jesus, but I felt as though my body were nailed to the chair. I was scared. There was no way I could go forward.

I did go forward that night, and chapters upon chapters of my story have since been written, only this time they focus on what it means to know Jesus and how to live for him and grow in a relationship with him.

In fact, that story is still being told.

Everybody has a story. What's yours?

KEY QUOTE

“A very troubling reality is the growing segment of professed Christians who live self-centered lives, who give less than two percent of their income to the cause of Christ, who rarely share their faith, pray, or read the Bible, who do not resist temptation or handle difficulties well, who refuse to love their enemies, pray for those who hurt them, return good for evil, or refrain from gossip, criticism, and complaining. This is becoming widely accepted as normal Christianity. Today, make a commitment to really train yourself to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Begin practicing some of those basic spiritual disciplines that will help you to be continually growing in your relationship with God.”¹² — Rev. Larry Kirk

TRY IT

Not sure where to start? Try this simple three-step approach:

- 1) BEFORE I gave my life to Christ, these are some of the things I feared or struggled with or had questions about or . . . (nearly anything can be filled in here).
- 2) HOW. Here's *how* I gave my life to Christ: I said a simple prayer like this . . . (share an honest prayer).
- 3) NOW that I am a believer, this is how it has made an impact on my life . . . (There is no need to pretend your life is perfect, because it's not. Still, I'm certain God is at work in your life, so list some ways God has responded to some of your "before" issues above?)

I TRIED IT!

Leslie, 20-something, about herself: "I love watching ESPN and cheering for the Atlanta Braves."

"I was convinced I would never share my faith, even though I knew God wanted me to do so. But the reason is because I thought it required me to stand on a corner and yell at people. When I found out it could mean sharing with a friend or family member over coffee, that was easy. In fact, I had been doing that for years."

PRAYER

"Heavenly Father, you have done great things in me and are continuing to change me. Thank you for that. Give me opportunities this week—even today—to share my faith story with others.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Eleven

All You Need Is . . . TO REMEMBER

Nothing communicates care like follow-up. If someone asks you to pray for their upcoming exam, give that person a call later to see how it went. Someone needs prayer for an upcoming surgery? Write the surgery date on your calendar and send a note or give a call the day after the surgery.

KEY VERSE

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers (Philemon 4).

iForget

Time for a confession. While I joyfully follow Jesus, I also keep my eye on Apple Computers. I made the switch to Apple products several years ago and can't imagine life any other way. (According to statistics, I may have just offended a large percentage of my readers; however, since more people make the switch every day, if this book stays in circulation, that percentage will continue to decrease . . . smile.) The Apple store is a fun place to visit. Even if I don't plan on purchasing a thing, it's great to go and feel valued and affirmed, as the store nearest to me offers top-notch customer

service, particularly from one sales associate named Ryan.

I met Ryan two years ago at a workshop offered at the store, and since that moment he greets me by first name every time I enter. The first few times I was shocked, and after insuring I wasn't wearing a monogrammed sweater or name tag, my initial shock turned to respect. Now, I not only expect Ryan to greet me by name, I look forward to it.

Recently, as I wandered past iPads and iPods, I tried to think of the three (or was it four?) people I promised to pray for at church last week. Not only had I not followed up to see how they were, I couldn't remember what I was supposed to pray about. I could use an app for this. But most of all . . . I could use a heart, and a few memory tips, to make sure I remember.

KEY QUOTE

"What's the best thing about losing your memory as you get older? You never have to watch reruns on television."¹³

TRY IT

Quick tips on remembering what's important:

- 1) Write things down.
- 2) Ask someone to hold you accountable.
- 3) Create a deadline by writing on your calendar the day you will complete the task.
- 4) Do the task immediately (then you don't have to remember).

I TRIED IT!

MaryAnn, 50-something, about herself: "I'm a retired nurse who loves dark chocolate."

"As a busy woman, I found myself getting frustrated and disappointed when a student at youth group, a friend at Bible study, or anyone asked for prayer and I would forget to pray for them. I started to write notes to myself to remind me who to pray for. I made sure I did not write specifics of a personal prayer request so

that I would keep confidentiality. Sometimes, I would just put a picture or an object up that would prompt my memory to pray for certain people. I tried it, and it works!"

PRAYER

"Heavenly Father, thank you for always remembering my needs and all that is on my heart. Help me show that kind of care to others.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Twelve

All You Need Is . . . TO SHARE THE NEWS

Most are good at asking for prayer; a few are good at praying. But it's rare when someone reports on how God responded. Be vocal and report on how God has answered your prayer. Either it will be a time to thank God for his provision, or it will be a reminder for people to continue praying.

KEY VERSE

Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story (Psalm 107:2).

Prayer: The Movie

It's fun to talk about movies we're going to see and forward links of trailers and clips to friends. And when we announce plans to see a movie, the morning after follow-up is expected. People want to hear your analysis and discover intricacies to the plot. They might ask questions about the cinematography, the acting, and the director. You teased them the day before, so be prepared to deliver a report.

The same is true with prayer. Imagine a movie trailer featuring dramatic music and a deep-voiced announcer:

One man. One request. One hope. Against all

odds, he cries out to God. But he hears . . . nothing. Follow the adventure as (your full name) searches for an answer. Time . . . is running out.

If you've shared a prayer request with others in the past, take the initiative to give updates. Even if people aren't asking, keep the request before people by asking for their continued support or reporting how God responded. Continuing the dialogue is one way to keep the emphasis on God and to open up conversations where others might ask for prayer themselves.

KEY QUOTE

"Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Psalm 96:3).

TRY IT

Going public with your faith can be the most frightening *and* energizing thing you can do. The first step can be the hardest to take, so here are some sentence starters:

- "Can I tell you what God has been teaching me lately?"
- "Want to hear about an answer to prayer?"
- "As you know, I've been dealing with _____, so I started praying about it. Here's the latest: . . ."

I TRIED IT!

Chris, 30-something, about himself: "I love chicken cutlets and may have the largest thumb muscles in the world."

[Author note: I'd take Chris' word on the thumb muscles for two reasons. First, he's a powerlifter who has benched over 900 pounds. Second, did I mention he has benched over 900 pounds?]

"I talk a lot. My friends know I'm vocal, but I rarely talk about my faith. When I thought about it, I realized it's because I don't want to offend anyone or feel like I'm forcing my faith down their throats. So, I gave it a try. After telling a few select friends about

some things I had been praying about, I found they didn't mind hearing about my faith. In fact, I have come to understand that as long as I don't get on my soap box and start preaching, they're usually encouraged by what God is doing in my life. So, lately I've been more vocal about my faith, and it's helped start some good conversations."

PRAYER

"God, I want people to know you are alive and active in my life. Give me the courage and boldness to share how you are working in my life through prayer.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Grow with a Group

Thirteen

All You Need Is ... A COMMITMENT TO GO

Active church participation is probably the greatest way to connect with God—and others—and grow in your faith. Still looking for a church home? Ask friends or family members who attend in your area for a recommendation. Remember, there is no perfect church, but your faith will grow through active involvement. Please note: the key is involvement, not just attendance.

KEY VERSE

Let us think about each other and help each other to show love and do good deeds. You should not stay away from the church meetings, as some are doing, but you should meet together and encourage each other (Hebrews 10:24, 25, NCV).

New View

“The church is the hope of the world!” I still get goose bumps when I listen to Pastor Bill Hybels speak about the role of the church. I think it impacts me so much because it awakens me to the church’s potential. Truthfully, I can be guilty of having a poor view of church from time to time. When I hear whining or complaining or see inactive Christians, it gets me down.

However, I'm just as much to blame. I can't allow God's intended view of the church to be altered in my mind. I need an adjustment . . . and that's what Hybels' phrase about the church does for me.

I've been reading Ephesians 1 lately, and the end of the chapter states that Christ is the head of the church, and that we are His body. That's amazing! Not only is the Lord commissioned to oversee the church, but he uses us to fulfill the task. That's a high calling and one I want to take seriously.

Let me ask you three questions, and see if any resonate with you.

- 1) Have you ever thought attending church is a waste of time?
- 2) Have you ever been critical of your church or its leadership?
- 3) Have you ever wanted to leave your church in order to attend a "better" church?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you're not alone. In fact, I've been guilty of all three. Yes, even a pastor can have a bad attitude. But these next three commitments always help move me forward:

- 1) I believe the church *is* the hope of the world.
- 2) I commit to serve joyfully and enthusiastically.
- 3) I commit to pray for our church leadership.

If you've ever struggled with a low view of the church, I invite you to embrace the three statements above. When you're tempted to doubt or complain, reread the commitments and ask God to make them part of your life. Truthfully, you and I are the ones who can make a difference in the health of the church. All we need is a commitment to go and to do so with a cheerful heart and serving hands.

KEY QUOTE

"Beware of the mindset in looking to see if the church will meet your needs. . . . When my family is ready to leave for church,

we take certain expectations about what we want to receive and leave them at home with our dog. Consequently, everything we do receive is a blessing."¹⁴ — Luis Palau

TRY IT

Make an appointment with one or more of your pastors to encourage them. Let them know that you have a renewed belief in the church and that you want to see your church do amazing things in the community. If your pastors pass out, help them up and then let them know they can count on you to serve joyfully and enthusiastically.

I TRIED IT!

Kim, 30-something, about herself: "I hope to one day write a children's book."

"I made a commitment to pray everyday for forty days for my pastors and leaders, and while I believe God encouraged them, the exercise renewed me. Every time I was tempted to be critical or complain, I took a minute to pray for the pastor and the situation, asking God how I could be part of the solution. Wouldn't you know it? I found that I was more calm and offered practical suggestions when talking to the pastor, instead of being critical. Makes me think prayer might actually work!"

PRAYER

"God, you created the church, and I need to commit to it. Help me find a church where I can settle in and become part of a family.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Fourteen

All You Need Is . . . TO REMEMBER WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS

One of the easiest—yet most overlooked—ways to grow spiritually is to sing to God at church. There's a high probability that you sing at church, but do you actually sing *to* God? Do you sing passionately from your heart? How about thoughtfully with your mind? This weekend, let God be your target. Think about what you're singing, and direct all praise and adoration to God.

KEY VERSE

Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song (Psalm 95:2).

Roast in the Oven

Ever go to church because you had to? Ever check your watch at church more times than your Bible? Do you know how many ceiling tiles are above the pulpit, how many people were wearing blue shirts last Sunday, the percentage of people with blonde hair in the first five rows or . . . you get the idea.

It's easy to get distracted at church. What prevents you from focusing on God in worship? Are you guilty of any from the list

below? If you can think of additional ways your attention has been diverted, write them alongside this list.

Top 10 Reasons We Don't Sing With Our Hearts at Church

1. **Other people:** "Where's ____?" "Do you believe ____ is actually here?" "Look who ____ is sitting next to."
2. **Other clothes/hair/accessories:** "I love that haircut." "I can't believe she's wearing that outfit in church." "You see the size of that ring?"
3. **Sports scores/current events:** "The pregame show starts in 20 minutes." "I don't think he should start at quarterback." "Doesn't the singer on the left look like that guy from the movie we saw last night?"
4. **To-Do list:** "What verse are we on? I have no idea—look at the size of my to-do list. He better wrap this thing up."
5. **After-church plans:** "Soon as we get out of here, I'm going to the lake."
6. **Own voice:** "Trust me—you don't want to hear me sing."
7. **Others' voices:** "Is that a dead cat?" "He sounds horrible. How embarrassing."
8. **The band's sound:** "How come they can never get that song right?" "It's way too loud."
9. **Song selection:** "We never sing good songs anymore." "I'm tired of this song."
10. **Musical style:** "That song is so old." "Who listens to that kind of music anyway?"

Caution: It's easy to get distracted. Make a decision before church starts that you will focus on God and the truths found in each of the lyrics—no matter who's wearing what, or who's sitting with whom.

KEY QUOTE

"The sanctuary lights were dimmed, and the choir came down

the aisle carrying lighted candles. A three-year-old girl sitting in church for the first time began to sing in a loud voice, ‘Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you ...’¹⁵

TRY IT

If singing “loud and proud” is too much of a first step, don’t sing at all. Instead, close your eyes and think about the meaning of the lyrics. Interact with them during the song by using them as a prayer. “God, Your amazing grace is priceless. Thank You for saving me. I pray my family members will come to know you and that they, too, will sing this song in the future.” Another option is to meditate on a word or phrase that is meaningful to you. Talk to God about why they’re significant to you.

I TRIED IT!

Julia, 50-something, about herself: “I love my family! I have the most perfect-for-me husband ever and two handsome, funny, talented sons.”

“I love to sing, but because of that, sometimes I lose track of the fact that I’m worshipping God through the songs. I’m also a very social person, so it’s easy to become distracted in a worship service as people are coming in during the singing. I have found that it helps to close my eyes and picture myself singing directly to God. Doing this has also helped me to think more carefully about the words I am singing. Sometimes I forget that there are other people around me! This has made my worship of God during services much more intimate and meaningful.”

PRAYER

“Lord, worship is all about you. Keep my eyes focused on you so I can sing with my heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Fifteen

All You Need Is . . . TO BE PART OF A FAMILY

Being part of a small group is significant in your growth and development as a follower of Jesus. The words *family*, *together*, *share*, and *one another* are found hundreds of times in the Bible. Our faith is best expressed as a family. God himself models community in the Trinity.

KEY VERSE

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith (Romans 1:11, 12).

‘Till Death Do Us Part

Darlene is a committed follower of Jesus today because of her small group.

She got involved after accepting the challenge to make a one-year commitment to spiritual growth through her church’s small group system. At their first meeting, everyone had a chance to tell a little about themselves and why they were participating. Darlene bubbled over with excitement about her recent engagement. Her fiancé lived in another state, so she thought this would be a good

time to focus on her relationship with God. She was a fairly new believer and hoped to become as spiritually strong as her fiancé.

Two weeks later Darlene skipped her small group. After not returning several phone calls from the group leader, she decided to attend the next meeting to inform the group she would no longer participate. “My engagement is off,” she uttered, barely audible, while looking down at her feet, frustrated that she hadn’t painted her toenails. “I can’t do this for a year. I don’t even know where I’ll be living in a year. My whole life changed in one phone call.”

Darlene’s group listened to her that night, putting aside the curriculum and taking time to pray with her, reminding her that God still had a plan for her life, even though it was not clear at that moment. At the end of the night, Darlene agreed to meet two of the other women in the group for coffee later that week, an event she now refers to as “a cup of hope.”

She explains: “Christy and Barb helped me see that because I didn’t know what the future held, the best thing I could do was stay in the group until I had clear direction. They also helped me see that I now had a chance to give everything to God. This was a new concept. Before the broken engagement, my relationship with God was only as strong as my fiancé’s relationship with God. I felt connected to God through him. Now that he was gone, I realized I had nothing left but God, and if I was ever going to develop my own relationship, this was the perfect time.”

Plenty of painful months followed for Darlene, but her small group not only provided the emotional support she needed, it began to equip her with the spiritual growth tools to survive. Today, Darlene is happily married and leads her own small group.

She also has a coffee mug with one word written on it: HOPE.

KEY QUOTE

“‘Mind your own business’ is not a Christian phrase. We are called and commanded to be involved in each other’s lives.”¹⁶ — Rick Warren

TRY IT

Christianity is meant to be a public faith. We are to show our love to one another and serve one another. Even the fruit of our ministry is to be seen by all. So if you're not in a group, approach a small group leader and ask if you can try it for three months. If you're already in a group, step it up by declaring you want to grow and help others grow. Model authenticity and encourage others to open up by your example.

I TRIED IT!

Cindy, 40-something, about herself: "I secretly want to learn to ballroom dance, but the closest I've ever gotten is clogging."

"I was part of a small group years ago and enjoyed it, but once some families moved, it created a lot of turnover and I never felt connected to the new group members. So I stopped going. I was hesitant to try again, but after being challenged by my pastor, I signed up and . . . so far so good. While it can still be awkward from time to time, I definitely see its merits."

PRAYER

"God, help me set aside the time I need to invest in other's lives. And help me be open to others investing in mine.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Sixteen

All You Need Is . . . A FRIEND TO HELP YOU LEAD

You may have found participating in a small group to be a rewarding experience. Now maybe it's time to up the ante. You've seen how a group works, and you've identified leadership methods you'd like to duplicate and others you'd like to avoid, so now it's time to lead your own group. You won't do it by yourself, however. Get a partner to co-lead with you if you like, but mostly, get a teammate to pray with you and for you. Leading a successful group takes more than organization; it takes a willingness to enter a spiritual battle. Step out in faith to lead a group, but first step out on a foundation of prayer.

KEY VERSE

And pray for me, too. Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God's mysterious plan that the Good News is for Jews and Gentiles alike (Ephesians 6:19, NLT).

Whatever It Takes

For some, the thought of leading a group paralyzes them with fear. Others claim they're not intimidated, but, oddly, they never get around to doing it. If you've ever hesitated to take on an area

of leadership, let me introduce you to a dynamic team that is sure to inspire.

I learned about Team Hoyt, the father-son racing team of Dick and Rick Hoyt, through a YouTube video that made me weep until I couldn't see. Rick is an independent thinker and college grad with a sharp mind. His father is an ex-military man. What sets them apart, however, is that Rick was born a spastic quadriplegic, nonspeaking person with cerebral palsy—and a belief that he is no different from anyone else.

And so nearly every weekend, you can find Dick pushing, pulling, and carrying Rick over trails, through the water, and down bike lanes. Thus far they've run in and completed, together, more than 60 marathons, nearly 100 half-marathons, and 229 triathlons, including six at Ironman distance (2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, and 26.2-mile run). In total they've raced in 984 events—and still counting. Did I mention they also biked and ran across the United States in 45 days?

Why do such things? The first time they participated in an event, a five-mile charity run in which Rick begged his dad to allow him to participate, Rick told his father at the end, "Dad, when we were running, it felt like I wasn't disabled anymore!" That statement changed Dick's life; Team Hoyt was born. Author Rick Reilly writes, "I try to be a good father. Give my kids mulligans. Work nights to pay for their text messaging. . . . But compared with Dick Hoyt, I [stink]."17

The love of a father shown by Dick to his son Rick inspires and humbles me as well. It inspires me to take action when I have opportunities to do so . . . and it humbles me that I too often leave those opportunities to someone else.

Romans 12:1-8 reminds me that I have a responsibility to use my gifts. Not only am I part of a body that functions best when it works together, but my actions are also a way to worship, a sacrifice to the God who sacrificed everything for me. I used to think I didn't have the right gifts to lead a group, but that only

gave me an excuse. Dick Hoyt never thought he had the ability to complete a triathlon while pulling or pushing or carrying his son. But in order to serve his son, his first step forward led to a second race, and a third . . . and years later . . . one of the most impressive competition resumes ever.

KEY QUOTE

"God, the Word of God, and the souls of men and women. According to the Bible, these are the only things that will last eternally. To the extent that you are involved in these three things, you are involved in eternity."18 — Jerry White

TRY IT

Most people are intimidated to lead small groups because they imagine they're leading a large group by themselves. Why not start by simply asking one or two friends to join you before or after work for a Bible study? Or pick a Christian book or two or three (including this one) that interest you and lead a discussion—many books include discussion questions, too.

I TRIED IT!

Ed, 40-something, about himself: "Whenever I try to repair items around the house, I break more things."

"I resisted lots of the ideas in this book, but this is the one I *ran* from. Naturally, it's the one I ended up loving the most. I basically decided to lead a group only to set an example for my friends, but I'm the one who ended up benefiting the most. I never thought I could lead a group, but I did a pretty good job. I had a co-leader and another person who agreed to be my personal prayer warrior, and they were both key in the group's success. If you've never led a group before, it may be the most challenging thing you'll do, but you will grow a ton. Go for it!"

PRAYER

“God, I’m excited and frightened about the possibility of leading a group. Help me be the leader my group needs and help me grow in my relationship with you.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Seventeen

All You Need Is . . . AN OPEN DOOR

It’s one thing to participate in a small group, and it’s another to lead a group. But hosting a group might be the biggest challenge of them all, as it requires a willingness to open your home for all to see.

But it might also be the very place where someone develops a faith story that lasts for eternity.

KEY VERSE

Friend, you have no idea how good your love makes me feel, doubly so when I see your hospitality to fellow believers (Philemon 7, Msg).

Welcome!

I’ve never lived in the country, so forgive me if my perspective is askew, but I envision a large farm house, a hammock in the yard, a couple of rocking chairs on a large porch, and a chilled pitcher of lemonade sitting atop a small round table. Oh, and there’s a pie cooling in the windowsill. Granted, most of my images come from watching Saturday morning cartoons rather than from firsthand knowledge, but I definitely envision a welcoming spirit in and

around these homes. Not so in other parts of the U.S.A.

I do have city and suburban experience, and unlike their country relatives, the architecture in these areas does not scream—or even whisper—“welcome.” Instead, city apartment buildings are protected by a secured door through which you must be “buzzed in” after identifying yourself via an intercom system. Or, a uniformed doorman greets you, preventing you from entering the building until given permission by the resident. It would be easy to think this type of privacy is only true in urban centers. Not so.

In previous decades, much of the gracious spirit surrounding country homes was replicated in the suburbs, only on a smaller scale. Today, however, the front porch has been taken over by the two- or three-car garage. Rarely is the front door ever used, as residents enter and exit through the garage. Instead of finding a BBQ or rocking chair in front of the house, you will find those items in the backyard—protected by a fence, lest a neighbor should happen to stop by.

I should have started this reading with the following warning: “Read at your own risk—you might get depressed.” It does seem that people prefer to be by themselves, or at least that’s the appearance we project. There is good news, however. If you are willing to show kindness and be hospitable, it will be noticed. In fact, if enough people enter and exit your home, a curious neighbor might call the police to investigate.

Robert Frost wrote: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Let your home be that kind of refuge for others. A friendly home is actually one of the vehicles God used to bring me to faith. I spent lots of time at Mr. and Mrs. Hall’s—the home of my best friend, Glenn. Their repeatedly warm welcome gave me a taste of Christian community and God’s love, and I’m forever grateful. It’s easy to open your home if that’s your gift, but it’s possible to do so even if it’s not.

Step out in faith and ask God to use your home (his, really) to show his love to others.

KEY QUOTE

“Hospitality is making your guests feel at home, even if you wish they were.”¹⁹

TRY IT

The biggest intimidation to hosting a group is all the work that is required. But it doesn’t have to be so tough. At your first gathering, pass around a sign-up sheet that requires people to bring a drink or snack, someone to come early to help set up, and someone to stay late to help clean up. You’re already providing a place to meet, so let this be a team effort. Others will actually appreciate the opportunity to serve.

I TRIED IT!

Glenn, 40-something, about himself: “I love Ping-Pong and pizza.”

“I often joke around by saying I don’t like people. But more often than not, it’s true! Because of that, my wife strongly encouraged me to host a small group. As you might imagine, I fought it as hard as I could, but my wife won. And now that we’ve done it, I’m happy to say I won, too. It was easier and more fun than I ever imagined.”

PRAYER

“God, help me show your love to others by opening my home for a small group. Use my home to help believers grow and to help nonbelievers meet you.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Eighteen

All You Need Is . . . TO ARRIVE EARLY (OR STAY LATE)

Ruth Bell Graham once said, “Pray when you feel like it, for it is a sin to neglect such an opportunity. Pray when you don’t feel like it, for it is dangerous to remain in such a condition.” Discipline yourself to pray for those you live, work, and play with by spending time before or after meetings to pray for each person by name.

KEY VERSE

Every morning you’ll hear me at it again.

Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on your altar and watch for fire to descend (Psalm 5:3, Msg).

Praying Through a Yawn

Cory and I used to meet once a week at 7 AM at a Seattle public high school to pray for each of my students. We’d pray for 30 minutes before school began. That required me to catch a 6 AM bus, one I always regretted the night before. Yet years later, I feel no remorse for how I used that time, even though, quite often, I wondered if it was a sin to yawn while I prayed. Those were early mornings.

While I don’t have many stories of how God worked in the

lives of my students the year I taught at the school, I am confident that God heard our prayers and used them in the lives of those students. And I do have a few stories. My favorite is when Cory and I met after school to discuss a ministry event he was planning. Oscar sat in a desk to the left of the room, three rows back. He was in detention and required to do homework, so as Cory and I spoke, he flipped through pages of a rarely opened textbook and scribbled notes on paper from time to time.

After Cory left, Oscar asked what we were talking about. I explained who Cory was—leader of a campus ministry called Young Life—and that he wanted to brainstorm ideas for an event for students that would not only be fun, but also give them a chance to learn about God. Oscar was interested, so we talked about the event and then talked about God. By the end of the conversation, Oscar prayed for Jesus to forgive his sins and begin a new life. That may have been the best detention he ever served.

I remember turning off the classroom lights after Oscar left, still looking at his desk—three rows back. Only two days earlier, Cory and I stood over that desk praying for Oscar by name, along with the other students who shared that desk over my six-period teaching schedule. I thanked God for the privilege of getting to share with Oscar, but also for the reminder that God honors faithfulness.

That story has always stuck with me and been instrumental in my prayer life. It keeps me disciplined to pray for my children while they sleep, and encouraged me as I walked the halls of my high-rise apartment building, praying for my neighbors. God has put people in your life that you see every day. Set aside a regular time to pray for them, and pray with the confidence that God hears and answers those prayers.

KEY QUOTE

“When we become too glib in prayer, we are most surely talking to ourselves.”²⁰ — A.W. Tozer

TRY IT

If the goal is to pray for your colleagues, you can do that in a number of ways:

- 1) Sit at your desk with a cup of coffee before work and pray for each of your coworkers.
- 2) Stand by a window that overlooks the parking lot and pray for people as you see them arrive or leave.
- 3) Walk through the lunchroom saying “hello” to friends and offering a silent prayer as you walk by.
- 4) Write a note letting colleagues know you prayed for them and leave it at their desk.

I TRIED IT!

Glenn, 40-something, about himself: “Whenever one of my favorite sports teams wins a championship, I run around the outside of my house in my underwear. So far, no arrests.”

“I only followed through on this because I promised my small group I would. But I was terrified to let people at work know I prayed for them because I thought they’d be insulted or offended. I couldn’t have been more wrong. Every person (all 12 of them) acknowledged my gesture through an email or phone call or stopping by my desk to say thanks. Two of the people, including my boss, actually wept as they shared what was going on in their lives. Wow. I’m really glad I did this, and yes, I’m doing it again.”

PRAYER

“God, I’m guilty of not taking time to pray for those I live and work with. Forgive me and give me a passion to do so. Help me see how important prayer is at home and at work.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Nineteen

All You Need Is . . . SOME POPCORN

Sure, going away to a conference would be great. But despite best intentions, sometimes it's just not possible. Don't despair! Many conferences offer their sessions on DVD or the Internet. Grab a calendar to set aside time, grab a notebook for notes, ask a friend or two (who will be serious about this) for a community learning experience—and then get some popcorn ready. (Really, why let any opportunity for popcorn pass you by?)

KEY VERSE

“Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock” (Matthew 7:24, NLT).

Stayference

I'm using this word with great liberality. I figured that since a “staycation” is a vacation where you physically remain home while mentally traveling wherever you want, then it's only fair that watching a conference via DVD is a *stayference*. I doubt that word will gather much traction, but it illustrates the picture for us just fine.

A stayference has numerous benefits: notably cost and time

flexibility. Like an online class, you are in the driver's seat and can begin your educational experience any day of the week, at any hour, and wearing whatever you like. If it sounds too good to be true, it is. Numerous articles cite the pros and cons of at-home learning experiences; the downers relate to time management, lack of meaningful interaction, and lack of accountability. There is good news, however: these can be overcome!

The time management challenge for a stayference is the same as beginning an exercise program: lots of good intentions with little follow-through. The key is making an appointment with yourself to watch the DVDs. Grab your calendar and set aside the 45 to 90 minutes that each session requires, along with some additional time for debriefing through note-taking. The best accountability for beginning a class, however, is the same for beginning an exercise program: do it with one or more friends.

Lack of meaningful interaction is the result of not being able to interact with the conference speaker. Of course, this is no different than at many large conferences, where it's not possible to engage in Q&A with the speaker. However, many conferences offer optional discussion groups or have corresponding workshops with smaller class sizes. Like the time management challenge, the best way to overcome this is to share the experience with others. Watch the DVD and talk about each session when it ends. Or pause the message in order to clarify what's being taught. If it's not possible for others to be involved, take time to blog your experience or email notes and observations to friends.

Accountability at a conference or participating in a class is instant because there's attendance and, often, projects or other homework assignments. Here's a challenge to overcome with a stayference: It's easy to skip out on one because, other than a nagging conscience, it's not likely others will know. Again, overcome this through the benefit of a shared experience. Not only will it require you to follow through on your commitment to watch the DVD, but you and other participants might choose to create

action steps that require additional interaction.

KEY QUOTE

“There is an immense difference between training to do something and trying to do something. . . . Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely. . . . Following Jesus simply means learning from him how to arrange my life around activities that enable me to live in the fruit of the Spirit.”²¹

— John Ortberg

TRY IT

Many of us have numerous books and tapes and DVDs teaching us “how to” do this and that. And, if you’re like me, they are in a box somewhere in the back of a closet or on a bookshelf covered in dust (or maybe they get dusted occasionally). The conference material is in your home; it’s time to get busy and take a class, setting aside the days/hours you need to complete the material. Pull out that calendar now!

I TRIED IT!

Steve, 50-something, about himself, “I love the sun, my bike, and iTunes—a perfect combination.”

“At a recent staff meeting, the topic I wanted to talk about fell through, so I reached for a DVD of a great leadership conference from the past. The video ran for about 45 minutes and was top quality, but the best part was, because we watched it as a team, we were able to spend a few minutes talking about it afterward—something you cannot always do at a live conference. As a result, we were able to process what the speaker said and apply it to our own context. It was a great experience.”

PRAYER

“God, thank you for the abundance of materials available that support and encourage my spiritual growth. Help me be a faithful student and to practice what I learn.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty

All You Need Is . . . TO POP YOUR BUBBLE

Can you close your eyes and predict everything that will happen at church? Where people will sit? How long the service will last? While those aren't bad things, they could be signs of familiarity and, thus, growing complacency. Take a Sunday or two to visit another church — see what God is doing in other bodies of believers. You might get a fresh look at church and be inspired. (Caution: Don't take this as license to hop from church to church with your membership. That's not the idea here. We all need to be faithful members where we attend — but we *can* learn from other places of worship.)

KEY VERSE

“Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it” (Matthew 16:18, NLT).

Umm . . . You're in My Seat

I dropped off a handful of students from our youth group to visit another church. I gave them two instructions:

1) Enter by yourselves three to five minutes apart.

2) Do not sit with or speak with one another.

The goal was for our students to be uncomfortable, to feel what it's like to be a visitor. Too often I watched our students observe a new person entering our ministry, only to ignore him or her by going back to the comfort of familiar faces and conversations.

Have you complained about your church lately? Is the music too loud, the preaching too dry, or the people too shallow? So, here's a question: when was the last time you sat in a different seat (or the opposite side of the room)? While not always the case, complaints often stem from complacency or comfort. Sometimes the healthiest thing we can do for our faith and the vibrancy of our church's ministry is to visit another church and experience it as an outsider.

It's healthy to get out of our comfort zone and see and feel an approach to faith through the lens of being a visitor.

KEY QUOTE

OK, I offer this in the spirit of fun:

There is a story about three pastors who got together for coffee one day and found all their churches had bat infestation problems. “I got so mad,” said one, “I took a shotgun and fired at them. It made holes in the ceiling, but did nothing to the bats.” “I tried trapping them alive,” said the second. “Then I drove 50 miles before releasing them, but they beat me back to the church.” “I haven't had any more problems,” said the third.

“What did you do?” asked the others, amazed.

“I simply baptized and confirmed them,” he replied. “I haven't seen them since.”²²

TRY IT

Important! The goal of visiting another church is not to compare one to another, but to experience church as a visitor. It's best to go to a church you have not previously attended, and to go alone.

Experiencing church as a visitor will likely motivate you to try new things at your church, many requiring faith and courage.

I TRIED IT!

Bob, 40-something, about himself: “I absolutely love sports, government and politics, peanut butter cups, and my wife and kids—but not necessarily in that order.”

“I used to be one of those guys who sat in the same place every week. Now I see how boring that is, how it drives us to a comfort zone. Now I like to mix it up: I might sit near the teens one week (hey, they don’t want me sitting *with* them), with the single guys another week (when my wife is serving in children’s classes), and, at other times when sitting with my wife, encourage her that we move to a different seating area entirely. Also, I love going to other churches in other cities when traveling. Everything looks and feels different—but that’s a good thing.”

PRAYER

“God, I love my church and want it to be the best it can be for your glory. And I want to serve you through it in the best possible way. Open my eyes to things I should or could be doing.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

On the Go

Twenty-one

All You Need Is . . . AN APPOINTMENT

Use your travel time to your next destination—work, meeting, home, or some other location—to pray for what’s ahead in your day and for the people you will see.

- Going to make a presentation? Pray for the details, clear communication, positive response, and more.
- Heading home for the night? Pray for re-entry to see your family or for the time you’ll spend with a friend. Pray for each person by name.
- Going out on a date? Pray for your date and for fun, honest communication, and that God would be honored.

KEY VERSE

Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete (John 16:24).

Appointments

An Internet search reveals a lot about a busy lifestyle:

- “The two most beautiful words in the English language are ‘check enclosed.’”²³ — Dorothy Parker
- “A bank is a place that will lend you money if you can prove

that you don't need it."²⁴ — Bob Hope

- "I used to sell furniture for a living. The trouble was, it was my own."²⁵ — Les Dawson

It's fun to laugh at some of the realities of life, and while this Robert Frost quote also has humor, it's only because it's painfully funny: "By working faithfully eight hours a day, you may eventually get to be boss and work 12 hours a day." We are busy and only getting busier. And that's not limited to work—our commitments at home, with friends, and in the community keep us on the go, traveling from one event to another. Because of our frenetic pace, we need a plan that enables us to stay connected with God at work, at home, and at play.

One of the most spiritual decisions you can make is to remove the headphones when you walk or turn off the radio when you drive so that you can prepare for your next meeting. And don't prepare by reviewing facts and figures or practicing your pitch. *Prepare in prayer.* Pray you would be the person God wants you to be, that you would have the courage to say what needs to be said, or for the wisdom to withhold what should not be said.

And don't just do this during working hours; consider your entire schedule in terms of appointments. Pray before you drop off your laundry, before you meet a friend for coffee, or before you go out to eat. Wherever you end up, you'll have an opportunity to serve God, so use your time for prayer to remind yourself that the Lord is in control.

Author Stephen Covey asks, "How many people on their deathbed wish they'd spent more time at the office?" The answer is obvious, but the same principle applies when we ask: How many of us wish we had spent more time in prayer? Don't let the *desire* to pray more intimidate you; instead, say a quick prayer right now.

KEY QUOTE

"I have so much to do today that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."²⁶ — Martin Luther

TRY IT

Besides covering your meetings/appointments in prayer, this exercise encourages a renewed mind. The more we allow God to be our focus, the more we can be controlled by him. If you don't know how to pray for the person you're meeting with, pray in general ways for him or her. Pray that God would bless his family and his work. Pray for his spiritual health, that he would be encouraged in his faith if he's a believer, or that he would be drawn to God if he's not. Also, take time to pray for yourself: that you would speak clearly, that you would be a good listener, and that you would honor God with how you conduct your business.

I TRIED IT!

Stuart, 30-something, about himself: "I would be happy eating nothing but peanut-butter and ice cream all day."

"I've been accused of being a pessimist, so no one was surprised when I rolled my eyes at this idea. This seemed way too simplistic. I wanted something substantial, something that would really help me grow. Well, as I'm discovering with the other ideas in this book, spiritual growth doesn't have to be rocket science. While there's a time and place for in-depth study, so much spiritual growth can take place with simple obedience. This exercise forced me to turn off the radio in my car, something I never do. And I discovered that when I practiced this, I arrived at my destination less frantic and more focused, even if I was late! My family noticed a difference, too. They said I didn't talk about work as much, which they appreciate."

PRAYER

“God, thank you for what’s next on my schedule. Give me the strength I need to please you and to effectively serve those I will be with.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty-two

All You Need Is ... A MAP

Find a new route to work. Walk or drive a different way to work and pray about who and what you see. It’s easy to become spiritually numb through routine. Mix it up from time to time to keep things fresh. You will see different things that will stimulate you in new ways. And talk to God while you’re on the way.

KEY VERSE

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path (Psalm 119:105).

Just Say No

I remember exactly where I was the day I committed *not* to read my Bible. It was a strange decision for someone who loved God, was committed to growing spiritually, and was studying to become a pastor at seminary—but I made the commitment as I drove along SE Division Street in Portland, Oregon.

I don’t recall what triggered my resolve, although I had a lot of spiritual unrest at the time. Besides being overwhelmed at school, learning a new theological vocabulary, and discovering an influential Christian leader in my life had been exposed as a fraud,

I wrestled with whether God's love for me was based on my actions. The twisted part of me hoped his love increased the more time I spent reading my Bible or in prayer. I was a disciplined person who rarely missed a day reading my Bible, and so I hoped this lifestyle would score some extra points on my heavenly scorecard. But I also felt guilty when I missed a day, questioning my calling to vocational ministry. How could I possibly serve as a Christian leader if I couldn't take care of my own spiritual life?

Today, I shake my head in disbelief when I recall that season of my life, and I cringe to think that other people actually live under that type of oppression—but I found that I did.

One of the lessons I learned at school—and one I learned at church, but could easily dismiss since the pastor didn't require a three-to-five-page paper on the topic—taught that God's love was unconditional. While God was saddened when I went astray, his love for me didn't decrease, nor did it increase the more I sought to please him. Rather, God's love was constant. This was an affront to my “people-pleasing” personality, yet I sensed it was critical for my spiritual formation. Could I actually have a relationship with God even when I struggled with my faith? Could I authentically share with people far from God that he really did love them?

My guts twisted as I drove, running those thoughts through my mind, until I decided on a test; I would *not* read my Bible for two weeks. This was an eternity for me, but I wanted to see if I experienced God's love even though I didn't seek Him. The result? I found my confidence in God's love grew significantly, and I couldn't wait to read my Bible. I actually wanted to read it, as opposed to feeling like I had to read it.

Sometimes we need to think differently, talk to people we've ignored in the past, or walk a different route to a common destination in order to see things fresh. Don't get stuck in a rut. Or, if you are, try a new way out—a way you would have laughed at previously.

KEY QUOTE

“I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving. To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.”²⁷ — Oliver Wendell Holmes

TRY IT

Turning left instead of right isn't going to necessarily change your life. But it just may. The point of this exercise is that God is at work in the world. He's doing things in your life you may not be aware of or that you may be stifling. But God is also doing something in the lives of those around you. Want a real challenge? Stop someone you see and tell them you're praying for the needs in the area. Ask if there's any way you can pray for them, or what needs in the city they're aware of. Or if you see a business or home that could use some love, let them know you and some friends are looking for ways to help in the neighborhood.

I TRIED IT!

Adam, 30-something, about himself: “I once went skydiving and snorkeling on the same day. Got to experience earth from two perspectives.”

“Really? Find a new way to work? To say I had doubts about this idea to help me grow spiritually is putting it mildly. But I tried it. Not only did I find a great new deli (had no idea that was there), I saw an old friend in a parking lot as I drove by. I felt like God wanted me to pray for him. I did and his face wouldn't get out of my head. I later called him and, after meeting for coffee a week later, found out his mom was really sick. He's not a believer, so it was hard talking about God with him, but this whole experience has forced me to find verses in the Bible to share with him and really think about why I believe what I believe.

“I guess the thing I learned from this idea is that routine breeds

laziness. Even the smallest change in my routine, along with a willingness to learn from it, helped open my eyes to needs around me.”

PRAYER

“God, is there something you want to say to me or show me that I’ve been missing? Help me to hear from you today.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty-three

All You Need Is ... A GOOD PAIR OF SHOES

Mix up your time of prayer by taking a prayer walk. Either walk while you pray through your predetermined prayer list, or walk and ask God what he wants you to pray about. Listen, walk, pray. It may feel awkward at first, but give it time. You don’t have to pray out loud, either.

KEY VERSE

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere (Ephesians 6:18, NLT).

Steps

I remember walking in Nepal with Butch, my wife’s cousin. Janine and I visited Butch and his family for a few weeks while I taught at the Bible school they were a part of. The school was about a mile from their home, and since they didn’t own a car, Butch and I walked there and back every day. I remember the initial awkwardness I felt after a couple of days passed and we had gotten caught up on all family matters. What else was there to talk about? How would we fill the time? Eventually, I learned to rest in

the quiet, enjoy the company of a family friend, and pray silently to God.

The silence allowed me to reflect on what was going on in my life and to hear from God. Because the land and culture were new, I always saw something that raised a question, prompting a discussion with Butch. The question usually led to a deeper conversation about a Nepalese custom, how it impacted Butch's ministry in the land, and, ultimately, a time of prayer. Sometimes we prayed out loud together; other times, we prayed silently. But all the time, I was learning to connect with God and the culture around me.

Once I returned home, I jumped back into my normal routine of driving to and from work, even though—like the Bible school—it was only about a mile away. The thought of going to work any other way seemed ludicrous. Yet I discovered that my time in the car did not provide much benefit. Granted, I was able to get to and from work quicker, but it took me longer to get settled in at work and home since I was rushing from one location to another, usually listening to the radio, and ultimately filling my head with noise and To-Do lists. So I tried an experiment.

On days that I did not have an off-site meeting, requiring that I drive, I walked to work. I learned to love it. Not only did I get to pray for my day, my To-Dos, and my family, I arrived at work and home excited to begin my job or see my family. It was as if walking had become a pregame ritual, preparing me for what was ahead. Not only was my head clear and my mind focused, but I also felt empowered, having prayed along the way. I wasn't able to do it every day, but it proved beneficial on the days that I could. So what happens if you don't live a mile from your job? Drive to work but park a mile or so away . . . and walk from there. Or drive to work and commit to walk near your job for 15 to 20 minutes before entering.

KEY QUOTE

*“The real voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new lands but in seeing with new eyes.”*²⁸ — Marcel Proust

TRY IT

Take a walk around your neighborhood, praying for neighbors as you see them or pass by their homes. Pray for marriages, children, careers, health, and anything that comes to mind for each family. It's OK to “skip” a house as you're praying. Don't feel like you have to pray quickly to keep pace with how fast you walk (or run). Instead, pray as you feel led. The same principle applies when praying for colleagues as you walk through the parking lot: pray for them as you identify their cars; or, as you walk through the office, pray for them as you pass their desks or work station areas.

I TRIED IT!

Peter, 40-something, about himself: “I've driven cross-country two times.”

“This has helped my prayer life. I'm a guy who likes movement. Sitting in meetings is tough, and sitting in church is tough. Sitting still anywhere is tough. Always has been—ask my teachers. So I always struggled with prayer because I thought it required me to sit or kneel in one place for an extended time. Walking while praying has helped me concentrate. And when I come to a place where I feel I have nothing to pray about, I look around and let my surroundings inspire me.”

PRAYER

“God, I want a fresh prayer life. As I walk and talk with you, help me to see people or things that renew my commitment to pray.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty-four

All You Need Is ... A PLANE TICKET

Make the investment! It may not be possible for you to register for an out-of-state conference, but if it is, make it a priority. Attending a quality spiritual growth or leadership conference can be, at times, like drinking from a fire hose, but it also can whet your appetite for putting your faith in action like nothing else.

KEY VERSE

Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation (1 Peter 2:2, NLT).

Conference or Bust

About 15 years ago, Chris and I attended a conference that changed the way we view life. We no longer saw ministry as something professionals did; rather, we recognized ministry was a calling for all believers. As a result, we could no longer cheer or complain from the sidelines. It was our job to get into the game and to help others do the same.

About a dozen years ago, my church staff traveled across the country to visit another ministry and learn from them. The experience was instrumental in shaping the way I view church and

ministry. It also helped me understand the heart and feelings of other staff members as we interacted on the pros and cons of all we saw and heard.

Just under 10 years ago, Bob and I flew south to see what our church plant could learn. Strategically, I wanted Bob—an influential leader in the church with limited exposure to outside ministries—to see what other churches were doing and to see some progressive models of ministry. Selfishly, I wanted him to help me form a foundation of excellence at our church. He was wide-eyed the entire time and more excited than ever about his role in the life of our young church.

About five years ago, I attended a conference by myself. I was hurting, having been diagnosed with depression, and was not sure what the future held. I didn't want to attend the conference, but I knew it was the right thing to do . . . and it was. It breathed fresh life into my deflated body, reminded me of God's power, and provided hope to take one more step.

Early last year, I took seven others to a student ministry conference. It was the perfect venue to learn, play, and pray. We grew closer as a team and developed ministry skills we wanted to learn, along with some others that God wanted us to learn.

Participating in a conference is costly, both financially and in terms of your time. It's always a challenge to go, but each time I've been grateful for attending. I don't have definite plans for the next conference, but I'm ready and willing to learn, so "Help me, God, see how you want to develop me and where I can go to learn."

KEY QUOTE

"95% of the time, someone else can do my position. I must do the final 5% . . . usually the things I don't want to do."²⁹ — Mark Batterson

TRY IT

I wish I could list more conference ideas for you, but there are

too many. Often, larger churches host these events, so if there's a Bible teacher you listen to or read, check his or her website. Ministry magazines or websites also advertise them. But here are a few to get you started:

- www.willowcreek.com/events/leadership (leadership development)
- <http://conference.youthministry.com> (youth ministry training)
- www.followtherabbi.com (Israel study tour)
- www.womenoffaith.com (women's ministry conference)
- www.whatisorange.org/orangeconference (children's ministry conference)

I TRIED IT!

Glenn, 40-something, about himself: "I have lived in six states."

"I actually signed up with a pit in my stomach, kicking myself for being talked into such a thing. But after attending the conference with the rest of my team, I signed up to host the next one. It was amazing! I can't believe I almost missed what God had in store for me."

PRAYER

"God, I don't want to be someone who always finds excuses for not learning or growing the way you want me to. If there's a good educational opportunity for me, give me the courage to take it.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Twenty-five

All You Need Is . . . TO TAKE A DRIVE

Retreat regionally. Find a place of refuge outside your community where you can get away from the noise, the pace, and your routine. This will require more time than your local spot, and while getting away for a day or more is ideal, don't miss out on a chance to escape for two hours. Read a book, take a nap, take a walk, and let your senses receive all the stimuli that surround you. Getting away takes a bit more work, but the payoff is worth it.

KEY VERSE

As soon as Jesus heard the news, he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone (Matthew 14:13, NLT).

I Want to Go Home

My family invited me to join them at Hemlock Hall every summer for years. They spent a week in a cabin on a lake in the middle of nowhere, about six hours from my home. Although the lure of time on a lake with nothing to do but rest sounded appealing, it also sounded like prison. First of all, I didn't like long car rides. But mostly, what would I do? I could take a swim, and a nap, and a hike . . . maybe read a little . . . but that would last about

half a day. Then what?

I said no to their gracious invitations for years, always providing some kind of seemingly reasonable excuse. But the real reason? Fear. I was afraid of being still. I found value in being busy and always having something to plug in or turn on when bored. The thought of being without my electronic security blankets for a week was too much to consider. Eventually, my family stopped asking.

To this day, I don't know what caused me to make my first six-hour trek to the end of the earth. I must have lost a bet, but whatever got me there infuriated me. I did my best: I swam, I napped, I hiked, I read . . . all in half a day. Then I stood motionless in my room, not knowing where to go or what to do. While I could geographically locate myself on a map—a printed one, mind you, as I had lost cell service a hundred miles ago—I truly was lost. I had developed such a nonstop, electronically driven lifestyle that I had a difficult time functioning. My family encouraged me to listen to the sounds of nature, but I couldn't. All I heard was the ringing in my ears that would not stop.

I considered going home, but the fear of another long drive frightened me, and I'm glad it did. I managed to make it through the day, and after a good night's sleep, I woke up with a better attitude. Not much better, but it wasn't hard to improve on the previous one. And while I continued to struggle throughout the week, I managed to make it all the way to the end. I did run into town one night (it took about an hour to find a town!) to go to a movie; I needed a fix, and it helped maintain my sanity.

I laugh at that first year in the woods, especially now, years later, when I long to take that drive and escape to the woods. I still have addictive tendencies, as I often sneak peeks on my phone to check baseball scores and continue to take that drive to catch a movie. But I'm now able to hear birds sing, and I've started to learn how to truly relax. I've got a long way to go, but my first victory was staying in the woods and not driving home that first night.

It's a good thing I don't like long car rides.

KEY QUOTE

"Meditation is . . . often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God's power and grace."³⁰ — J. I. Packer

TRY IT

Your biggest challenge may be unplugging for a vacation, getaway, or retreat. You'll want to bring your phone and computer and i____, but don't. Bring a pen, a notebook, a Bible, and a book or two. If you need to bring a phone, take the old one in the bottom of the drawer—the one your kids laugh at when they see it. When you arrive, take out the notebook and write on the top of a clean sheet, "Dear God," and then write whatever comes to mind. Continue the conversation throughout your stay.

I TRIED IT!

Rachel, teenager, about herself: "I'm a Jets fan and have a slight obsession with Starbucks."

"Honestly, TOTALLY worth it! I drove to the beach, found a quiet spot, and sat there with my Bible, notebook, pen, and iPod. I listened to music and just spent time with God. Britt Nicole's song "Seeing for the First Time" came on. I connected with the lyric: 'It's like I'm seeing for the first time / Like You opened my eyes to show me / Everything I've missed before / And I want more of You.'

And in the midst of God's beauty, that's exactly what happened."

PRAYER

"God, speak to me in a bold way. Help me pay attention to all you want to say to me and how you want to use me.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Grow Methodically

Twenty-six

All You Need Is ... AN INDEX CARD (OR YOUR PHONE)

Choose one Bible verse a week to memorize. Write it on an index card that you carry in your pocket or email it to yourself to read on your phone. The biggest obstacle to memorizing Bible verses is lack of confidence. When you make a choice to do it, you overcome that fear. The second biggest obstacle? Lack of review. That's the value of the index card. When you reach into your pocket (or purse) for keys or cash, pull out the card and do a quick review.

KEY VERSE

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Joshua 1:8).

Want to Buy a Vowel?

I'm both humbled and inspired by traditional Jewish education. "The Talmud encourages an early start: at five years the child is fit to be taught to read the Bible. Long before that, however, children learn to say the Sh'ma, and to repeat some prayers and Bible passages in Hebrew. For instance, it is the custom that the youngest present will ask the four questions on Passover night. This is a

cherished privilege, and quite small children will achieve it.”³¹ Of course, children are required to memorize these biblical teachings, and while some may say they are simply parroting words—that they don’t have a proper understanding of what they’re saying—at least they’re filling their minds with words of truth. The words may not be meaningful to them at this age, but they’ve got to have more value than what I can parrot.

Right now, I can tell you:

- the starting team for the World Champion 1986 NY Mets
- five different ways to get to Grimaldi’s Pizzeria in Brooklyn
- the names of more than 30 Jethro Tull records
- the teams playing in any year’s “Sweet 16” round of the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament
- numerous quotes from episodes of *Seinfeld*, *30 Rock*, *The Office*, and *Arrested Development*

Some of that info will help you win a trivia game, some will fill your belly, and some will certify that I may be nuts. But none will change your life. I don’t apologize for my eccentricity—all of those bits of information I’ve stored have meaning to me and rekindle fond memories. Instead, I just want a healthy collection of biblical wisdom to be bundled beside it. I want to be able to share a verse to encourage you, to challenge you, or to remind you of the awesome nature of God. I want to be able to focus on a biblical truth when I have doubts. And I want to be able to model for my children a love for God’s Word.

So I’m not where I want to be. But I’ve got a stack of index cards beside me. I invite you to check back with me in a few months to see how I’m doing. And one more thing . . . Let’s go Mets.

KEY QUOTE

Yes, we’ve got to work to remember things, let alone Bible passages. This reminds me of a story:

Aunt Aggie went to see her physician. She complained,

“Doctor, I don’t know what to do. You’ve got to help me. I just can’t remember a thing. I’ve no memory at all. I hear something one minute, and the next minute I forget it. Tell me, what should I do?” Her doctor replied, “Pay in advance!”³²

TRY IT

Friends matter! When I know a friend or family member is going to check my progress on my Bible memory verse, I am far more motivated to practice. I long for the day I have more internal than external motivation, but for now that’s where I’m at. If you want to improve your chance at successfully memorizing Bible verses, ask a friend to quiz you regularly. Better yet, encourage a friend to join you.

I TRIED IT!

Jess, 30-something, about herself: “I finished college in three years, but grad school took me seven.”

“I have a bad memory. I struggle remembering names, for example. But I’m also able to sing lyrics to 10-year-old songs and recite lines from my favorite movies. Want to know useless statistics about my favorite vacation spot? I’ve got plenty. So, maybe I have a capable memory, after all. I guess I remember what I value. When I started this practice, I only knew two Bible verses. I’m only up to seven now, but considering I learned the first two when I was six years old, I feel like I’m making good progress.”

PRAYER

“Father, give me a hunger to know your Word. Help me memorize it so that I’ve got something to share with those in need.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty-seven

All You Need Is . . . ANOTHER INDEX CARD (OR YOUR PHONE)

Write one key thought or quote from your Bible reading or a Christian book that you want to remember during the day. Write it on an index card that you carry in your pocket or email it to yourself to read on your phone. It's easy to spend time with God reading the Bible . . . only to close it up and forget what you read mere minutes later. Writing out a key thought on an index card will help to secure that thought, verse, or teaching. And when you review it at random times throughout the day, it will provide the reminder or encouragement you need.

KEY VERSE

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (Philippians 4:8).

Did You See That?

Jay Carty, a former NBA player for the Los Angeles Lakers and a gifted communicator, describes the value of Polar Bear Alerts in

his book, *Counter Attack*. A polar bear is analogous to temptation that comes into your mind. We all have tempting thoughts, and they're not necessarily sin, but if we don't replace those tempting thoughts with something else—preferably positive thoughts—we are more prone to give in to the temptation.

Here's how Carty's illustration works: If I told you not to think of a white polar bear, you would think of a white polar bear. We can't help it; it's the way our minds work. But if I tell you that when you think of a white polar bear, you should let that image trigger your mind to instead think of a pink elephant, what happens? Well, you still think of a white polar bear, but then your mind moves to the pink elephant. Carty's illustration simply reveals that the white polar bear doesn't stay in our minds as long if we have a pink elephant to think about. As Carty says, "That's a crucial concept if we call temptation the white polar bear, and if we call pink elephants the things of God."³³

The key thought for the day that you write on your index card is your pink elephant. Face it, you're busy. Not only will your mind be bombarded with tempting thoughts—you are human, after all—but you also have commitments to uphold, work to produce, and relationships to manage. It is far too easy to allow your busy agenda to crowd out any positive thoughts God wants you to focus on. So you need a plan: a pink elephant. Determine that you will take the moment in time to read the key thought you wrote earlier, and allow it to push out some of the other thoughts that are consuming you. The thought won't stay with you forever, which is why this is something to repeat throughout the day.

The polar bear concept works; it just may appear awkward at first. Jay tells the story of teaching this skill to a group of high school students who walked ahead of him after a teaching session. As Jay followed, a girl wearing "short shorts" (or as Jay describes them, shorts with a little "cheek" exposed) walked in front of the boys. They all stopped to check her out, until they yelled in unison "polar bear alert!" and hung a left in the other direction.

KEY QUOTE

“The Holy Scriptures tell us what we could never learn any other way: They tell us what we are, who we are, how we got here, why we are here, and what we are required to do while we remain here.”³⁴ — A.W. Tozer

TRY IT

If you’re using an index card, put it in your pocket or purse with your keys so you will frequently touch it. When you do, take a second to read it and be reminded of what stood out during your time with God. Or tape the card to your computer monitor—or another spot you will frequently see during the day. Or email it to yourself and print it out at work or home and place it by your computer.

I TRIED IT!

Peter, 40-something, about himself: “I like going to the movies by myself.”

“This is such a basic idea and probably the least high-tech, but it’s the one that has made the biggest impact in my spiritual life. I always forget anything I read or think about after spending time with God. I don’t forget because I’m not interested. I just focus on so many other things that the very thing I want to remember gets pushed out. Reading the card forces me to hit pause on my day and refocus my mind and energy. And it only takes 10 seconds! I prefer putting the card in my pocket because I have so many other notes on my computer monitor that it started to get lost.”

PRAYER

“Father, I don’t want to forget you or what you’ve taught me. Bring to mind whatever I need to focus on.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty-eight

All You Need Is . . . AN ALARM

Set your watch or phone alarm to go off every hour on the hour (or every few hours). Let the alarm remind you to push away from your desk for just a minute or two to think about God, pray for a friend, review a Bible verse, or something similar. Use the time to re-engage with God. Bring him back into your focus before returning to your workload.

KEY VERSE

God says, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10, NCV).

At the Buzzer

The sounds of bells and buzzers and whistles in athletics indicate that time has expired or a penalty has been committed.

Hospitals bells and buzzers provide a patient’s vital signs.

Police, ambulance, and firefighter sirens signal us to get out of the way.

An alarm clock wakes us from our sleep . . . or tells us to hit the snooze button in our pursuit of another seven minutes of sleep.

Generally speaking, alarming sounds frighten us and, at minimum, create a sense of panic or urgency. But that’s not always

the case.

The sound of a doorbell gives us reason to celebrate the arrival of a friend or family member.

The microwave timer stimulates our salivary glands as we expectantly wait for our movie popcorn to finish cooking.

And the same sports buzzer that caused chaos and dejection for one set of sports fans produces cries of euphoria from the other.

Let your watch or phone alarm be the joyful sound of an arriving friend, a reminder that the God of the universe is with you, loves you, and looks forward to spending time with you. Too often we approach God with disappointment, as though we’ve failed him. The alarm now rings anew, proclaiming his love and faithfulness. Thank him for all you accomplished during the last hour (or two or three, whatever you choose), and give the next one to him, too.

KEY QUOTE

“You can’t turn back the clock. But you can wind it up again.”³⁵
— Bonnie Prudden

TRY IT

At minimum, push your chair back or stand up when the alarm sounds, and use the time to pray for what you’re working on or other issues that come to mind. You might use the time to walk around the office or down the hall in order to spend a bit more time in prayer.

Consider including others at work or school, and hold each other accountable to use the time for prayer. You might even approach different colleagues or classmates and ask them how you can pray for them. In most cases, this should only be an extended stretch break, not more than one to two minutes.

I TRIED IT!

Jack, 50-something, about himself: “I was on a championship team at school, but I never actually played. I was an all-star

benchwarmer.”

“I used to have a watch that beeped every hour, and I disabled the function as soon as possible. Because of that, I knew hearing an alarm sound would annoy me, and I was right. But only at first. In time, I actually looked forward to the alarm sounding because it was my reminder to stop what I was doing and focus on God. Sometimes I took a 30- second break and other times a minute, but never more than a minute. But most of the time it probably only lasted 15 to 20 seconds, just enough time for me to close my eyes, take a couple of deep breaths, and pray to God. My colleagues never knew what I was doing so it never got in the way of my work.”

PRAYER

“God, I know you are with me throughout the day, but my busy schedule tends to push you away. Help me be constantly reminded that you are with me, watching me, and empowering me.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty-nine

All You Need Is ... A PLAN

Commit to a Bible-reading plan that allows you to get the big picture of God’s story. For example, read through the entire Bible in a year (or two). Or read through the Old or New Testaments or through the life of Jesus. Your church may have some reading plans, or perhaps your Bible includes some options. For other options, Google “read through the Bible” or visit www.biblegateway.com/resources/readingplans/about.php.

KEY VERSE

Then starting with what Moses and all the prophets had said about him, Jesus began to explain everything that had been written about himself in the Scriptures (Luke 24:27, NCV).

Hoops for Life

I met Darren when he was 14 years old. He arrived at my freshman English class with a less than impressive academic record. While the occasional teacher commented on his intelligence and potential, most simply wrote him off as “just another troublemaker from a messed-up family.” When I first met him, Darren sat up straight with his hands folded on his desk. While his peers

whispered back and forth, he resisted joining them and instead flashed a captivating smile with eyes that screamed, “Believe in me.”

Our first serious conversation was a week later, after I threw him out of class for getting into a fight. I squatted down so I could look him in the eye as he sat on the ground leaning against a row of lockers, his legs pulled up close to his chin. “Darren, I don’t know what’s going on between you and Patrick, but you’re better than this.” I was supposed to send him to the office, but I sensed that wasn’t the right thing. The “believe in me” look I had seen in his eyes only a week earlier was gone. Now his eyes were lifeless, offering a look I had seen in far too many upperclassmen who spent most of their time going in and out of the assistant principal’s office.

His fight with Patrick was over something that happened on the basketball court the previous day, so I asked Darren if he was any good. He replied as any arrogant freshman would; he guaranteed he was the best athlete in the class. I took that as a challenge and told him his classroom behavior would result in detention for two days—unless he could beat me in a game of basketball after school.

Needless to say, the life came back into his eyes and his smile lit up the hallway.

Over the remainder of the school year, Darren and I established a meaningful friendship. Unfortunately, some of our time together was spent while I visited him at the juvenile detention center after he got arrested for something I have long since forgotten. But Darren was an amazing kid who has grown up into a responsible, hardworking, and loving father and husband. His journey has certainly not been one any parent would script, but he has overcome numerous obstacles. And he has the scars to prove his fight has not been easy.

Darren was not worthy of the troublemaker label his teachers emblazoned on his forehead. That was a slice of his life based on

poor decisions. To understand the big picture of his life, you need to know his father and two older brothers were in jail when he was 14. He had a younger brother he tried to keep an eye on, but even that was challenging since his mother was a drug addict who rarely spent time with them. He needed a friend and supporter far more than he needed to know how to write a five-paragraph essay.

When I think of the school system’s view of Darren, I think of the Bible. Too many of us take a snapshot view of the Bible, reading a verse here or there without appreciating the Bible for what it is: a love story of a passionate God pursuing a sinful people. I needed a big-picture perspective to properly understand Darren’s life. When I had it, I discovered he had a heart and dreams and—eventually—I discovered he had the skills to write a five-paragraph essay as well. And we need a big-picture view of the Bible to understand it’s more than a collection of rules and regulations: it’s an invitation to walk with and learn from God.

By the way, I beat Darren in our basketball game that day, requiring him to attend detention a second day. He didn’t seem to mind—although he probably wouldn’t admit today that he lost.

KEY QUOTE

“The Bible is a very ancient book, yet it is always relevant to our lives. People in it have the same problems we do. Think of Noah . . . it took him 40 days to find a place to park.”³⁶

TRY IT

The best possible way to get a big-picture view of the Bible is to read it in its entirety. And while that may be a daunting task, it is doable! Team up with one or more friends and commit to reading it together. If this is your first effort, how about starting with reading the four gospels? Or reading through the New Testament? There are also many versions of chronological Bibles available, enabling you to read through the Bible in the order each book was written.

I TRIED IT!

Ronnie, 20-something, about himself: “I really enjoy cleaning—it takes my stress away—and I have over 30 bottles of cologne.”

“The first time I truly read through the Bible, I focused on how I could really grow as a Christian. I loved the books of Ephesians and James—they really stuck out—and they were full of instructions on how to improve your walk with the Lord. They have since remained my favorite books, and I enjoy seeing how perfectly they line up with the rest of the Bible.”

PRAYER

“God, I know elements of your story in the Bible, but I want to know more. Give me the discipline and desire to take my Bible reading further.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Thirty

All You Need Is ... TO SLOW DOWN

As opposed to the last devotional, sometimes we need to go in the other direction: sometimes less is more. If you’ve got a Bible reading plan, take a break from it and focus on one verse or one chapter (or even one smaller Bible book) for an extended time. For example, spend a week on one verse or a month on one chapter. As I wrote this, some friends and I were spending time memorizing the first chapter of Ephesians. Doing this forced us to *slow down* and focus on words or phrases we would normally read without a second thought.

KEY VERSE

I will study your commandments and reflect on your ways. I will delight in your decrees and not forget your word (Psalm 119:15, 16, NLT).

Hey! When Did That Get There?

I work on a street that probably has 50 shops on each side of the street. For a city boy, it’s not a big deal, yet rarely does a week go by that I don’t say, “Hey, I never knew that store was there.” A recent example is when I discovered a “new” deli. But the “Now

Celebrating 75 Years at This Location” sign destroyed *that* theory. Oddly enough, I have since discovered four delis on this one street—and three pizza places.

I also remember the morning I had a craving for Dunkin’ Donuts. Not knowing whether one existed on this particular street, I drove up and down two times, only to settle for an item at the one (I mean, one of four) delis on the street. Imagine my surprise when my colleague came in carrying coffee from Dunkin’ Donuts, just down the street. How’d I miss it?

It would be easy to assume I don’t pay attention to details, and while there may be some truth in that, I don’t think it’s that simple.

I’m a Jerry Seinfeld fan, and on his comedy album *I’m Telling You for the Last Time*, he offers this wisdom:

“Wait up!” That’s what kids say. They don’t say “wait,” they say “Wait up! Hey, wait up!” ‘Cause when you’re little, your life is up. The future is up. Everything you want is up. “Wait up! Hold up! Shut up! Mom, I’ll clean up! Let me stay up!” Parents, of course, are just the opposite. Everything is down. “Just calm down. Slow down. Come down here. Sit down. Put that down.”³⁷

When it comes to living life and reading the Bible, we need to be parent-like and just slow down. One of the reasons I don’t know every store on my street at work is because I’m driving past them. Even at 35 MPH, life moves fast. Walking the streets slows me down, and that helps . . . but there’s so much “noise”—literal and figurative—that it’s hard to focus and easy to get distracted. And in my donut example, I was looking for a particular style of sign, yet the town in which I work requires them to hang a different type of sign.

So how does this relate to reading the Bible? We can become numb to the words on the page. We’ve seen them there so much that we forget what they actually say. Or we force our interpretation

on a passage, based on our own experience, one the author never intended.

Slow down this week. Purposefully stop at random times and look up and around. I bet you’ll see things differently. And do the same with the Bible.

As for me, I’m searching for an ice cream shop. I haven’t found one yet, but I bet there’s a “new” one just ahead.

KEY QUOTE

“For fast-acting relief, try slowing down.”³⁸ — Lily Tomlin

TRY IT

If you don’t regularly read the Bible, this is a great way to start. Everyone can read one verse. But if you do have a disciplined reading plan, this will likely be a challenge as you’ll be forced to think about individual words rather than the content from a few chapters. Use a notebook and begin to write down what you’re learning or the questions that arise in your mind. You might also try reading from a different translation than your regular Bible. This will add freshness to familiar verses.

I TRIED IT!

Josh, 30-something, about himself: “I played Ultimate Frisbee for my college’s traveling club team.”

“I found much-needed freedom when I began to implement this idea. On my ‘Sabbath Day,’ when I rest from normal work and chores, I also rest from my normal Bible reading plan. Instead of continuing with my reading list, I spend the time I would normally spend marching through a passage—and often a little more time as well—just reflecting. Reflecting on a verse I’ve read earlier in the week, or on the general thrust of a passage I’ve previously read, or even on the whisperings in my soul that I haven’t had time to notice yet. Having permission to slow down has been a huge catalyst for growth—and renewal—for me.”

PRAYER

“God, I want to connect with you and learn from you—not just speed-read my way through the Bible. Help me focus on what you want me to know.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Thirty-one

All You Need Is . . . A CALENDAR

Birthdays are special days. Even if you’re aging and try to ignore the day, someone will remember because birthdays are meant to be celebrated. I even know people who celebrate half birthdays. Makes sense to me. Since birthdays are enjoyable, why not double the fun? Your spiritual birthday should be remembered as well. But acknowledge it with more than a . . . “Oh yeah, today’s the day.” Get a cake, party hat, and favors, and take time to recommit to another year of following God. Or it might be a time to renew a commitment if you’ve lost your faith in God.

KEY VERSE

“We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!” (Luke 15:32, NLT)

If / Then

WARNING: Spiritual birthdays aren’t for everyone. Why not? Well, they indicate spiritual receptivity . . . which leads to commitment . . . usually followed by accountability. Of course, this could be a good thing. It all depends on what you hope to achieve

with a life of faith.

If you want to honor God with your life, then celebrating a spiritual birthday gives you a chance to renew your commitment to Christ and thank him for all he's done in your life.

If you like to deflect attention from yourself, then a spiritual birthday is the right fit. While people will gather to honor you, you get the opportunity to point to the One who guides and leads your life.

If you are willing to be held accountable for your faith, then make a public declaration of action steps you will take in the new year.

If you want to lead by example, then this is your chance to acknowledge to others that you want an active faith, and you can encourage others to join you.

If you value prayer, then take this opportunity to share your heart and ask for specific ways people can pray for you.

If you like cake (or the food of your choice—bean sprouts, anyone?), then a spiritual birthday is for you. Sure, this day is really about Jesus, but since he's letting you pick the food, get your favorite!

KEY QUOTE

Let's celebrate Easter with the rite of laughter.

Christ died and rose and lives.

Laugh like a woman who holds her first baby.

Our enemy death will soon be destroyed.

Laugh like a man who finds he doesn't have cancer, or he does, but now there's a cure.

Christ opened wide the door of heaven.

Laugh like children at Disneyland's gates.

This world is owned by God, and he'll return to rule.

Laugh like a man who walks away uninjured from a wreck in which his car was totaled.

Laugh as if all the people in the whole world were invited to a

picnic and then invite them.³⁹

— Joseph Bayly

TRY IT

While I can point to a specific date I made a decision to follow Jesus, many people cannot, particularly those who grew up in a Christian home. For many, their belief was a process, a season of life rather than a set day. If that's you, pick a day and begin celebrating on that day. The point is not to worry about a specific day, but rather taking time to focus on God—what he has done in your life over the last year, and what you pray he will do in the year ahead.

I TRIED IT!

Carol, 40-something, about herself: "I don't have a competitive bone in my body, yet I love doing triathlons."

"I immediately thought of all the AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) anniversaries I have attended. They use these anniversaries to encourage and inspire one another. At an AA anniversary, folks stand in the front of the room and share a bit about where they were and where they are now. I love it! Every year I plan on celebrating the awesomeness of Christ in my life, with the hope of giving God all the glory and cheering others on to live for God, too. Happy Birthday to me!"

PRAYER

"God, this spiritual birthday is all about you. Thank you for leading me to you and help me not only follow you this year, but to do so with passion and enthusiasm.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Thirty-two

All You Need Is ... SOME DISCIPLINE

Dante, Italian poet from the Middle Ages, reminds us that, “He listens well who takes notes.” The discipline of note-taking during Bible studies—and especially during church services—helps us focus and aids retention. And since most of us can’t remember what last week’s sermon was about, having notes to review is a terrific resource.

KEY VERSE

Wise men store up knowledge,

But with the mouth of the foolish, ruin is at hand (Proverbs 10:14, NAS).

Containment

Our culture has gone container crazy. Not only does a place like The Container Store exist, it’s also wildly popular. I hoped to find some new food containers for the kitchen and was immediately intrigued by their “expert tips and ideas” feature for using their products. I filed that away for future reference and began to feel somewhat out of my league. Call it container intimidation. I knew I was officially in over my head when their website invited me

to shop by category. Category? You mean like small, medium, and large? Maybe clear or frosted? Oh no. My limited container worldview was about to explode. I quickly discovered they have products for every room in your home. Yes, even the bathroom.

For the purpose of this entry, however, let’s stay in the kitchen. Plastic containers serve multiple purposes for food. They seal and protect, allowing my food’s life expectancy to be sustained so that it can be eaten a second (or third) time. Not only that, but because the containers make my food portable, it can be eaten anywhere and shared with others. If it sounds like I’ve spent a bit of time thinking about this, I have.

But all this “container knowledge” works to my advantage because it ends up being a helpful parallel to note-taking. Think about it: if you regularly take notes at a Bible study or in a church service—of course, this applies to business meetings as well—the discipline helps seal and protect the information, allowing its life expectancy to be sustained. (You saw that coming, didn’t you?) Note-taking is also portable, so you can review and share the information anywhere.

If you think this analogy might be a bit of a stretch, realize there is tremendous power in note-taking. Just as it would be a waste to throw extra food away at every meal, give your new knowledge a second life by reviewing it after a meeting, message, or church service. You likely won’t use every note you take, but if the practice gives your study or conversation extra power, it will be worth it. Plus, like The Container Store, note-taking can be used in every room of the house. Yep, even the bathroom—a great place to think!

KEY QUOTE

“Arnold Bennett was a writer I admired. He was actually taking notes at his father’s deathbed.”⁴⁰ — Hugh Leonard

TRY IT

Carry a small notebook with you to church or Bible study, or use your phone or other electronic device. Don't capture every word that is taught, but listen for key quotes or big ideas. Write down questions that may arise or action steps you hope to take. Think of ways to use the new information in your own life. If you're just getting started, ask a friend to take notes as well; compare notes later.

I TRIED IT!

Leslie, 20-something, about herself: "Double chocolate chip cookies are my weakness."

"I often saw people at church taking notes and wondered why they would do such a thing. I decided to give it a try and was shocked at how much more I was able to focus. My notes aren't all that detailed, but I stay engaged with the message and I leave them in my car and review them occasionally during the week. It helps refocus me on busy or stressful days."

PRAYER

"God, I want to take advantage of all you are teaching me through pastors and other Bible study leaders. Give me the discipline to take notes on all I am learning, and help me put them to use.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Thirty-three

All You Need Is ... A WILLINGNESS TO BE HUMBLLED

Christian History magazine helps us see why reading Christian biographies is so valuable:

We are too easily captive to the contemporary and become unthinking assenters to our culture's seduction by the now, the latest, the present moment. Understanding of Christian history will help us in many ways. We will uncover precedents in the past of how God has worked. We will gain perspective that will help us see our current situation in a new light. We will develop a sense of continuity and see how the unfolding of God's purposes transcends any single generation, century, denomination, geography, or ideology.⁴¹

And, as in my case, you will be humbled and inspired by the lives of great men and women of God.

KEY VERSE

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other.

Act on what you hear! (James 1:22, Msg)

Words to Live By

I haven't read a large amount of Christian biographies, but when I do, I'm never disappointed. Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place* is a book I often think about, particularly when going through challenging times. Corrie's perspective and Christian witness while persevering through the horrors of the Holocaust humbles me. Reading books by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hudson Taylor have challenged my faith, as have the words and actions of Reverends Billy Graham and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And when you add modern biographies by people like quarterback Tim Tebow, soul surfer Bethany Hamilton, and the prodigious Duggar family, you're bound to be reminded of the power of a faith-filled life.

If you're not sure where to start, here are some topics and quotes from *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*.⁴²

Courage: "If I were to say that God sent me, I shall be condemned, but God really did send me." — Joan of Arc

Faith: "Expect great things; attempt great things." — William Carey

Conviction: "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Passion: "If the Word of God forbids female ministry, we would ask how it happens that so many of the most devoted handmaidens of the Lord have felt constrained by the Holy Ghost to exercise it? . . . The Word and the Spirit cannot contradict each other." — Catherine Booth

Confidence: "If this world is going to be reached, I am convinced that it must be done by men and women of average talent." — Dwight L. Moody

Purpose: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us." — Hebrews 12:1, *NLT*

KEY QUOTE

"Do not have your concert first, then tune your instrument afterwards. Begin the day with the Word of God and prayer, and get first of all in harmony with him."⁴³ — Hudson Taylor

TRY IT

Talk to friends, talk to your pastor, Google "Christian biographies," search Amazon.com and Christianbook.com, visit a bookstore or your local library. Do whatever you can to get some books: beg, borrow, or steal. (OK, don't steal. But that does remind me: there are some great biographies of former criminals.)

I TRIED IT!

Katie, 40-something, about herself: "I don't have a favorite sports team, but Twyla Tharp is my favorite dance company."

"I am a mother of three and I have three jobs, one for each kid, so honestly, I don't have time to read much and have never picked up a Christian biography. I do watch movies, though. *Soul Surfer* is a pretty awesome true story. Also, Tyler Perry's movies all come from a Christian perspective, although fictional. What I usually walk away feeling from one of these movies is that other people have equal struggles to mine and relying on their faith will walk them through the fire to the other side. It's a good reminder. God is here to help me. Every day in every way."

PRAYER

“God, I am privileged to be able to learn from men and women who loved you and lived for you. Help me hear from you in their lives so that I, too, will be a Christ-like example for others.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Thirty-four

All You Need Is ... A WILLINGNESS TO LEARN (AND MAYBE A NOTEBOOK)

We all have questions, and they shouldn't intimidate us. Questions are our friends. They pique our interest and give us an opportunity to find answers. It's not likely that we'll have time to find answers to all of our questions, but start making a list and identify the ones that won't go away. Pick one a month to explore.

KEY VERSE

And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth (Acts 17:11, NLT).

Zip Growth

I have friends in the city, a married couple, who are spiritually hungry. They are not believers in Jesus, but they have questions and are willing to ask them. They attended our Easter service in the suburbs this year, and when we announced we'd be hosting the Alpha Course (a video-based, small-group curriculum that discusses the key tenets of the Christian faith), they signed up.

They were excited to have a chance to dialogue on who Jesus really is and what it means to follow him.

I was thrilled for their interest; even more so to watch their excitement as they talked about signing up for the group. But I'll admit that my enthusiasm also was tempered. I remember checking my watch, feeling my pessimist reflex kicking in, and wondering how long it would take until they realized they couldn't attend the class. I was certain that once their fervor wore off, they'd realize their participation would be geographically challenged (it was a four-hour trip to the church), and they'd withdraw from the class. Because they live in the city, they don't own a car—they don't need one. They only agreed to attend our Easter service because I drove into the city and gave them a ride. I quickly began researching churches near their home, hoping one had an Alpha or similar group they could attend, but I was not optimistic. I was almost certain they'd no longer be interested since they wouldn't know anyone at the church.

During my Internet search, the husband called me, asking if I'd like to meet them next week before their Alpha group. I paused, wondering how I could rearrange my schedule to pick them up in the city, when he clarified, "We'll meet you at the coffee shop near your church." Thoroughly confused, I asked how he would get there. "Zipcar!"* he enthusiastically shot back. He then explained he and his wife had already reserved a Zipcar for the next 12 weeks—a four-hour rental every Wednesday night.

I was excited and humbled by their decision. I have many questions about God and the Bible that lie dormant in the back of my mind because I don't set aside time to research them. My friends, however, just blocked out a four-hour chunk in the middle of their work weeks for the next three months because they were no longer satisfied having unanswered questions.

Let me be honest: I don't believe in zip growth. There is no magic potion that instantly makes us wise. But clearly, there are Zipcars, a resource that, when used accordingly, can move us forward in our

quest to know God. What zip step do you need to take this week?

*Zipcar is a membership-based car-sharing company providing automobile reservations to its members, billable by the hour or day (www.zipcar.com).

KEY QUOTE

"God will answer all our questions in one way and one way only—namely, by showing us more of his Son."⁴⁴ — Watchman Nee

TRY IT

Team up with one or more friends and begin making a list of your questions. Meet every week or every other week to discuss what you're learning. Try to answer one or two a month.

I TRIED IT!

Cindy, 40-something, about herself: "My all-time favorite comedy is Liar, Liar."

"I was always intimidated by questions because I didn't know how to answer them. Plus, I felt paralyzed because I had more questions than I had time. Simply writing them down took the edge off, though, because while I thought I probably had hundreds of questions, I only had 17 real questions. That's still a lot, but not as many as I assumed. I've only gotten an answer to two over the last four months, but that's two more than I previously had answered."

PRAYER

“Heavenly Father, you provide wisdom when I need it, and I’m asking for it now as I seek answers to some of the tough questions in my life.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Grow Courageously

Thirty-five

All You Need Is ... A LITTLE COURAGE

A friend of mine once said, “Confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation.” It’s the fear of a bad rep that keeps people from being honest. But people respect truth-tellers, especially those seeking to move forward in life and make changes. Be bold and tell the truth. God will be honored, you will be thankful, and your friendships will be strengthened.

KEY VERSE

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so God can heal you. When a believing person prays, great things happen (James 5:16, NCV).

Metro Musings

I stood just past the entrance to the ‘L’ subway line, an east-west subway that would take me two stops to Union Square, where I would transfer to the 4 or 5 Train to get to my home downtown. I stood far away from the entrance to protect myself from being bumped into and to form as much of a sound barrier as possible. I remember the moment exactly: where I was standing, how I looked at the pavement around my feet to ensure I wasn’t stepping

in anything unsavory, and even how I felt. Even now my stomach tightens. This was a defining moment in my life, a time where I cried out for help.

Today I can tell you that I was suffering from a previously undiagnosed autoimmune disease that manifested itself with fatigue and painful sores in my mouth and throat. My body grew tired of the chronic pain and began to shut down, pushing me toward depression, something I had never before experienced. Today, I have a doctor who monitors me and prescribes medication to limit the effect of the disease. There are even scientists searching for a remedy. But on that late afternoon day, all I had was a cell phone and friend on the other line.

Glenn knew I had been struggling; we had talked about it before. But that day was one in which I was far more uncertain about life than ever before. I shared my frustration, and he listened. I described my pain, and he listened. I listed all the questions and doubts that banged against my heart and my head, and he listened. And when I finally stopped talking, Glenn offered encouragement, a practical next step, a prayer, and he even made me laugh—or at least tried to do so. That wasn't the first time Glenn offered perspective when I had none, and likely it won't be the last. But that was a day when James 5:16 was more than text on a page. It was a living expression of a loving God, and the cherished action of a faithful friend. My confession that day was not one of sin; I had not done so. But my state of mind was leading me down a path destined for sin. I knew that, and so I made the call. I'm glad I did.

KEY QUOTE

"I have many regrets, and I'm sure everyone does. The stupid things you do, you regret if you have any sense, and if you don't regret them, maybe you're stupid."⁴⁵ — Katharine Hepburn

TRY IT

If confessing sin to someone other than God is not a regular

practice in your life, you've got two options: start small or jump in the deep end. Saying "pass" to confessing to a friend is not optional. It's a healthy habit in a growing Christian's life. (Again, if you haven't already, read James 5:16 from God's Word.) If you start small, go to a trusted friend and let him or her know that this is an area you want to grow in, and, would he or she mind if you shared with them sometime in the future? If you're ready to do a cannonball, do the same thing as the small step, but tell your friend you're ready to share *now*.

I TRIED IT!

Rebecca, 20-something, about herself: "I love rap and dream of recording an album someday."

"Everyone assumed I had nothing to hide because I was so outgoing. Seems funny to me now that they would think that, but I guess my big personality was a bit intimidating to people. The truth, however, was that my every word was calculated. I never let anyone think anything about me that I didn't want them to think. But when I learned more about the Bible's teaching on confessing our sin to one another, I decided I needed to start being more concerned with what God thought of me than what others thought. I knew God saw me as his child, but I wanted him to see me as his obedient child. It was tough at first, but now it's completely normal. Plus, my friendships are much deeper."

PRAYER

"Thank you for being forgiving. Give me the courage to share what I've done or what I'm going through with a friend.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Thirty-six

All You Need Is . . . TO STOP AND SAY HELLO

Instead of walking past every person who stands on the corner seeking money, stop one time and offer to buy him food or share some money. Introduce yourself, ask for his name, and let him know you'll pray for him whenever you see him. Remember to say "Hi" the next day as well, calling him by name.

The same principle applies at work or school. Is there someone you avoid? Make an effort to reach out to this person. This will be an act of service and require you to call on God for help. It might even be a big step of faith!

KEY VERSE

Dear brothers and sisters, pray for us (1 Thessalonians 5:25, NLT).

Small Talk That Matters

Herbert's name was often mentioned by my wife and kids. They spoke of where they saw him that day, the stories he told, the laughs they had, and the food they shared. Herbert would be identified by most as a homeless man, an apt description. However, my family knew him as a friend.

Sadly, Lucille was identified as the neighborhood crazy lady. Again, a reasonable description considering her public persona, which consisted of shouting matches with the voices in her head and forced most pedestrians to cross the street when she approached. Yet when Lucille was not having an "episode"—likely a medication issue—she was a kind woman with her own set of stories and experiences. Lucille had value; she simply did not have the medical treatment she required.

Not every person is safe to approach. The news reveals too many horror stories of Good Samaritan efforts gone wrong. But most are safe. Being able to discern who is safe to approach and who is not isn't a fail-safe skill to develop. But our attitude toward "those people" is what can be adjusted.

Living in the city, I was presented with opportunities on a daily basis to practice "street smarts," a phrase which simply means to be on your guard. As a parent, it was critical to teach my children how to walk with purpose, not talk to strangers, and always be mindful of their surroundings. Teaching them to keep a listening ear to God's Spirit in the midst of the hustle and bustle was more challenging.

Learning to love those who are unlovable or those cast aside in society is where the Christian life proves itself. We may not be able to help every person we see, but we can faithfully pray. And if the person is someone we see on a regular basis, we can pause to introduce ourselves and ask how we can pray for them.

Sometimes those cast aside are homeless, but more often than not, they are colleagues or neighbors or relatives with homes, careers, and a past that haunts them. It's easy to keep our distance like everyone else, but it may be the right thing to do to show love and to offer friendship and prayer. I don't write this as an expert but as one who continues to learn what it means to show and tell the love of Christ. I'm glad I have my wife and my kids to model Christ-like behavior and the Holy Spirit to lead me.

KEY QUOTE

Everyone needs a friend, as noted by former UCLA football coach Pepper Rodgers after a disastrous season: “I had only one friend—my dog. Even my wife was mad at me, and I told her a man ought to have at least two friends. She agreed, and bought me another dog.”⁴⁶

TRY IT

When most people come across this idea, they’re quick to say, “There are no homeless people where I live.” While that may be true to a certain extent, there are definitely people in need where you live. However, think beyond the physical needs people have. Who in your life is an outsider, someone who people avoid for some reason? Why not develop a relationship with that person—or rebuild one you may have had previously?

I TRIED IT!

Josh, 30-something, about himself: “I love saltwater fishing.”

“Wanting to have the chance to interact with homeless people, I was beginning to lament the fact that there didn’t seem to be many of them in the area where I work and live. About that time, God seemed to say, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll bring them to you.’ Within days, a homeless man pitched his tent—literally—on the lawn where I work. Resisting the temptation to immediately become protective, I tried the ‘hello’ approach and ended up taking him to breakfast. In addition to having the opportunity to meet some further material needs, I got to listen to his story and see many of the hurts that had led him to such a low point in his journey. I didn’t solve the problem of homelessness—for the world or even for him—but I had a better appreciation for the fact that ‘these people’ are real people, with real hurts and hopes.”

PRAYER

“God, it is clear that you love everyone and I don’t. Help me overcome my prejudice or pride and show your love to all people today.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Thirty-seven

All You Need Is . . . THE COMBINATION

Our sense of adventure is often tucked away in the back of a closet. Even when we struggle to unearth it, we discover our courage is locked away in a safe. Fortunately, we have the combination. It's "Listen to God" right . . . "commit to God" left . . . "ask others for prayerful support" right . . . now *ACT!*

KEY VERSE

Haven't I commanded you? Strength! Courage! Don't be timid; don't get discouraged. God, your God, is with you every step you take (Joshua 1:9, Msg).

Crossing the Bridge

My friends Glenn and Cindy jumped into a cab heading to the airport after a quick three-day visit with my family. I've known this amazing couple for years and was sorry to see them go. They later described their ride to the airport as quiet and reflective. Yet, both felt a stirring within, and because of the inexplicable nature of what they believed they should do, neither was ready to share with the other.

As the cab crossed the Brooklyn bridge, they were both able

to look over their shoulders at the city skyline: breathtaking, daunting, and exciting. But home? Surely not. They headed west on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, when Glenn could wait no longer.

"Cindy, this is going to sound crazy, but I think we're supposed to move to the city for two years and help Gregg and Janine at their new church."

Although belted in, Cindy nearly flew into Glenn's arms, tearfully sharing that she overwhelmingly felt God calling them to do the same. They enjoyed the moment and rapidly described all the reasons to make such a move. But reality was the elephant in the cab, and both acknowledged the absurdity of the idea:

- 1) They lived in Atlanta.
- 2) They had just recently purchased a new home in a buyer's market, which could prove to be financially unwise if they attempted to sell so quickly.
- 3) They had two young sons who were just beginning school.
- 4) The cost of living in New York City would be astronomical compared to their home in the south.
- 5) It would be impossible to raise the money and accomplish all they had to do within the limited time frame they believed God wanted them to make the move.
- 6) How would Glenn's work respond to his request for a two-year ministry leave of absence?

I hope someday you get to meet my friends and get a chance to hear all the ways that God provided for them, and if you do, your eyes will be wide, your jaw will drop, and your neck will tire from shaking back and forth in a sense of amazement. Glenn and his family of four did move to New York City for two years and helped strengthen our church spiritually and numerically while also providing an untold amount of encouragement and support for me.

You ever get the sense that God wants you to do something

incredible, seemingly impossible? Don't dismiss it as crazy. God just may be waiting for you to take the first step.

KEY QUOTE

"How we spend our days is—of course—how we spend our lives."⁴⁷ — Annie Dillard

TRY IT

Instead of assuming your dreams are crazy, make a list of things you would do for God if money, time, and life's circumstances were not issues. The list may or may not be from God, so don't act too fast. Instead, spend some some periods in prayer going through that list, asking for clarity. Better yet, ask some trusted friends to pray with you. Meet with your pastor and other church leaders and ask for their wisdom and support.

I TRIED IT!

Kristen, 20-something, about herself: "I drove into my grandmother's house while learning to drive."

"I told my pastor I didn't feel God was calling me to do anything big for him. He said I needed freedom to dream. At first, I didn't know what the heck he was talking about, but the more we discussed, the more I realized I had grown up in a very structured environment that didn't foster creative thinking. I'm not blaming my family or anything, but I was never pushed to dream or to listen to the dreams God might have for me. So I still don't know if God has great plans for me, but I'm now praying about it and taking time to listen."

PRAYER

"Heavenly Father, it's time I started to trust you and step out in faith. Give me the reminders I need that you are always with me and the courage to take that first step of faith.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Thirty-eight

All You Need Is ... THE FREEDOM TO FAIL

Go public with your spiritual growth goals and ask for accountability in accomplishing them. Researchers, scientists, and bloggers all have opinions on why we don't accomplish goals. In his TED talk (TED is the Technology, Entertainment, Design: "Ideas Worth Spreading" people), music entrepreneur Derek Silvers says you're more likely to reach your goals if you keep them secret! But, regardless of which of these two camps you fall into, "If you aim at nothin' you'll hit it every time." Don't worry about being afraid you won't accomplish your goals; if you start today, you'll still be further ahead tomorrow than if you don't do a thing.

KEY VERSE

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us (Ephesians 3:20, Msg).

Pulled Over

CAUTION: Your spiritual growth goals might be dangerous for your health.

With sirens blaring and lights flashing, the prophet Amos stops Israel dead in its tracks in its quest to look good for God. We've heard this before (1 Samuel 15:22 and Matthew 23:27), but maybe it's time to believe that God is far more interested in who we are on the inside than how we project ourselves on the outside (1 Samuel 16:7).

I'm in the process of memorizing the first three chapters of Ephesians. But why? Who is my target audience? Do I want to draw closer to God or hear people "ooh" and "aaah" at accomplishing a great goal?

I want to know the big idea and basic outline of every book of the Bible. But why? Do I want to better equip myself to teach others, or do I crave affirmation for my biblical knowledge?

Truthfully, I can question every goal that comes in my mind or that you share with me. By nature, we are selfish people, and so I admit I do like to be liked. But that doesn't minimize my desire to grow closer to God, strengthen my faith, or enrich my ministry. It does, however, force me to pause and evaluate my motives. But we can't allow mixed motives to paralyze us. It's vital to press on and fight back any selfishness along the way. And that's one of the primary benefits to seeking to grow spiritually with friends. They not only provide the motivation to study or review, they can also challenge us if they think we're moving in the wrong direction.

Don't be afraid to fail. Instead, fear inactivity. Let the thought of a wasted life get you away from the TV or any other activity that takes you away from what you know you should be doing. But don't seek spiritual growth in silence. Speak up and share your goals and grow together.

KEY QUOTE

"I think I might be a workaholic. A lot of it is a way of dealing with other parts of living that I don't feel as comfortable with, such as relating with human beings."⁴⁸ — David Byrne

TRY IT

You don't have to call Guinness and try to set a spiritual growth record. Just take a step forward:

- Have you ever read through the entire Bible? Start there. Or start with the New Testament or the four gospels.
- When was the last time you memorized a Bible verse? Pick two to three of your favorites and begin working on them.
- Do you know how to share your faith? Or respond to challenging questions? Begin learning today.

I TRIED IT!

Katie, 40-something, about herself: "I grew up in Oklahoma, certain I would be a movie star. Twenty years later, I now live in New Jersey with my husband, three kids, two dogs and six chickens. My kids think I'm a star."

"I wanted to read through the Bible and never had success, so I put Becky Tirabassi's *Change Your Life Daily Bible* in my car door. When I am waiting in my car for one of my kids (which I spend a lot of time doing), I'll read whatever is under that date. She has broken up the Bible into daily readings. She gives you a little bit of Old Testament, a little bit of New Testament, a little bit of Psalms, and a Proverb. Sometimes, I'll try and memorize the Proverb. It passes the time and gives me something to think about other than the next kid that I have to pick up and what I'm going to throw together for dinner that night. And I like the idea of the Bible being in my car door. I feel safer on the road."

PRAYER

"God, if you've given me this goal, give me all I need to succeed. If my goal is not a good one, revise it so I can be all you want me to be.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Thirty-nine

All You Need Is . . . A COMMITMENT TO TEACH

Want the “secret” to spiritual growth? Become a teacher. Teaching won’t guarantee your growth, but it will put you in the best position to grow. When you are required to teach, you are forced to prepare and pray—sounds like great growth prep to me. But becoming a teacher requires a commitment. You can’t just show up and expect an audience. Start a Bible study at work or sign up to teach at church. You’re not signing up for life—most classes are about 12 weeks, and Bible studies are often shorter.

KEY VERSE

You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others (2 Timothy 2:2, NLT).

Semper Fi

Sometimes we’re afraid to teach because we’re afraid to fail. But teaching is more than learning. I’ve had lots of good teachers, and many have inspired me to learn. But I’ve had one exceptional teacher, and he inspires me to live.

Galen is not a college or seminary professor, school administrator, or even a certified teacher. He’s a junior high youth leader and registrar at a small Christian college. But he may be the smartest guy I know.

I met Galen at church, and upon discovering my interest in student ministry, he invited me to serve with him on the junior high ministry team. Galen is the master of teaching people where they’re at. He can hold his own with seminary professors and articulate eternal truths with ease to 10-year-olds. He can answer immediate Bible questions and then help people prepare for future questions he knows will arise. I’ve known Galen for 20 years, and even though we live on opposite ends of the country, I contact him when I can’t find the answer I need.

I’ve had plenty of unique educational experiences with Galen:

1. He threw me over his back to communicate the importance of being spiritually ready at all times. (He was a former Marine, so he taught me how to fall without getting hurt . . . but I was still scared.)
2. He had me and others repel down a 100-foot cliff to teach the importance of putting our faith in the right object.
3. He is constantly aware of his surroundings and uses them as illustrations. Whether it’s an object outside a window or a current TV series, Galen makes learning fun and tangible by always keeping it on a level his learners understand.

I think the greatest lesson I’ve learned from Galen, however, is his authentic love for God and people. Galen is a busy guy, but if you have a question, you get his full attention. The more I think about Galen, the more it sounds like I’m describing the teaching methods of Jesus. And while I’m certain Jesus wasn’t a Marine, he was always prepared to lead people with love and compassion.

If you’re afraid to teach, you can simply shy away from a tremendous opportunity. Or, as modeled by Jesus, and Galen, you can take a step of faith, believing God can and will use you,

regardless of your proficiency. Teaching may be scary, but it's a great way to live a full life, one that overcomes the fear of failure.

KEY QUOTE

"Who dares to teach must never cease to learn."⁴⁹ — John Cotton Dana

TRY IT

One of the best places to begin is to volunteer to join the children's ministry team. Children's teachers actually become the best teachers because they're forced to break down complex truths. If you're ready for a challenge, start there.

I TRIED IT!

Julia, 50-something, about herself: "I love birds! I have been known to get up at the crack of dawn to go out bird watching with my husband, and I've endured bitter cold, pouring rain, and heat in pursuit of some species. Birds of prey are probably my favorites. My husband likes hummingbirds. Go figure."

"When I began to teach Sunday school, I thought I would be teaching children. Little did I know that it would be a huge learning experience for me as well! As I studied Bible stories and spiritual principles and sought to make them accessible to young children, I found that God was teaching me. Many times the children's response to my lesson helped me understand God's love and purpose more deeply. And sometimes they asked some pretty tough questions, which forced me to really examine things that I thought I already understood. It was a big commitment to teach Sunday school, but it grew my faith more than any other volunteer position I've undertaken."

PRAYER

"God, I admit I'm afraid to teach others. But I want to trust you more than I trust myself, so help me step out in faith so that I can grow my faith.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Forty

All You Need Is . . . NOTHING!

Fasting isn't something that goes quickly. But it has incredible value, as noted by pastor and author John Piper: "Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God."⁵⁰ It's a reminder that God is in control, not our bodies, nor our desires. Most people fast from food, but don't limit yourself to that. Try fasting from TV or media. Whatever you choose, the key is to replace the time you would spend doing those things with a spiritual practice like prayer.

KEY VERSE

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:16-18).

Detox

We all need it. Some detox from alcohol or drugs, the most

common references to cleansing our bloodstream from poisonous toxins. But we've all filled our bodies with poison: TV, gossip, social media, or food. This may seem insignificant, but I need to abstain from playing games on my phone or gorging myself on TV sports. They're time-wasters that distract me from what's really important.

A spiritual detox is fasting. The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible defines fasting as "Eating sparingly or abstaining from food altogether, either from necessity or desire. In medical terms, fasting is the detoxification of the body through the restriction of food."⁵¹

The emphasis in spiritual fasting is to set aside an activity, usually—but not limited to—eating. And while there's benefit in the discipline of denying yourself food or another night on the couch in front of the TV, denial should not be the end game. Instead, replace the normal activity with some sort of spiritual discipline like prayer, Bible reading, or reading books like this one (Nice start!). It's a simple purge and refuel, but it's not necessarily easy.

KEY QUOTE

"God is whispering to us well-nigh incessantly. Whenever the sounds of the world die out in the soul, or sink low, then we hear these whisperings of God. He is always whispering to us, only we do not always hear, because of the noise, hurry, and distraction which life causes as it rushes on."⁵² — Frederick Faber

TRY IT

Pick a day and fast from food or TV or gossip or surfing the web or junk food or alcohol or being critical or . . . (nearly anything can be filled in here). It does have to be something that is sacrificial for yourself, however (or else you've missed the point).

Set aside the time you would eat or watch TV and pray or read your Bible or try to memorize a Bible verse. Fasting from being critical? When tempted, instead choose to pray for the person you'd

normally criticize or share an encouraging word or compliment.

I TRIED IT!

Bob, 50-something, about himself: “I enjoy gardening and restoring old furniture.”

“I chose to fast from being critical of others. I added an extra 10 minutes to my morning prayer time and had one goal for the day: not to judge or be critical of others. If I felt tempted to judge, I decided to pray instead. I prayed a lot that day! This opened my eyes to the amount of automatic judgment of others I do on a daily basis.”

PRAYER

“God, I want to hunger for you. I want to crave you the same way I desire food or anything else that gives me life or satisfaction. Give me an appetite that only you can satisfy.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Forty-one

All You Need Is . . . TO BE A THRILL-SEEKER

God speaks to us all the time—those nudges to say something or do something are God’s Spirit calling us to action. What if you designated one day as “Obey God’s Spirit Day,” where you committed to do whatever God wanted you to do . . . no matter what?

KEY VERSE

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

The Dare

“October 12,” I said after writing the date on a napkin and sliding it across the table.

“I’m not doing it,” Jim whined, pushing the napkin back in my direction. I loved Jim, but I was tired of that voice—the one that complained about politicians, poor customer service, his job, the economy, and, ironically, people who complain.

October 12 was my attempt to address one of those complaints, his frustration in feeling as if he had plateaued spiritually. “I feel

stuck” was his actual phrase, yet his only remedy seemed to be repeating that phrase with an ever-increasing rate of whine.

“October 12 is your spiritual birthday,” I said, “and it’s only two weeks away. Honor what God did in your life by choosing on that day to obey every impulse you believe is from God.” The thought of all-out obedience frightened him—a reasonable response, actually.

“What would people think?” he whined.

I love Jim (not his real name); really, I do. He’s a good guy. But it’s a bit sad. He could have made a difference. Today, a week later, as I write this, I am still left to wonder: Yes, what *would* people have thought had you chosen to take this challenge, Jim?

KEY QUOTE

“Perfect obedience would be perfect happiness if only we had perfect confidence in the power we are obeying.”⁵³ — Hannah Whitall Smith

TRY IT

This is not for the faint of heart, so here are essential ingredients for the day:

- Don’t do it alone. Get people who will pray for you through the day.
- Start strong. Your biggest challenge will be getting going. It will get easier the more you obey. (There’s a life principle here!)
- Remember, it’s better to fear God than other people.
- Have fun. Learn to laugh and go for it.

I TRIED IT!

Ed, 40-something, about himself: “I’ve butchered more meat than you could ever imagine, having been a professional meat cutter, and later owned my own pizza shop for 10 years.”

“I’ll never forget the moment it clicked. I had been holding back from God. Holding back and holding back. Then my Army

National Guard unit was called to serve in Honduras. I’ll never forget seeing how the people lived—on hillsides, in mud huts, with nothing. It changed everything for me. When I got back to the States, I was ready to go for it. I became a Christian.”

PRAYER

“God, your Bible makes it clear that obedience to you is what distinguishes me as your follower. Help me say no to my fear and yes to you.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Forty-two

All You Need Is . . . A PASSPORT

And maybe a shot or two, depending where you go. I close this section with this one: if you want to put your faith to the test, sign up for a mission trip. Wait for the summer if you want . . . or start researching so you can go another time of the year. Opportunities abound. Have no expectations other than hearing from God and seeing the world in a new way. Enjoy!

KEY VERSE

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8)

Faith Fuel

Mission trips are meaningful.

- I loved seeing our students huddled in prayer for the men, women, and children they served earlier that day.
- I was proud when I saw them offer their shoes and shirts for children who had none.
- I knew I was witnessing life change when a group of students said no to their own meals so that the money could be given

to feed the homeless.

Nearly every time I hear a group speak of their experience on a mission trip, the members always say, “I went on this trip to serve, but I was the one who ended up being served. I got more out of this trip than I was even prepared to give.”

Overseas mission trips are expensive. They are uncomfortable. They can be dangerous. But they cannot be missed. We all need catalysts in our lives that remind us what’s important and reveal how much we’ve been blessed. It’s also crucial to reconstruct our value system, and mission trips do that. When you get a chance to look into the eyes of an impoverished person who has more joy than you thought possible, it raises important questions about what truly matters.

Take time with a group from your church or your family, or both, to have your faith challenged. Be open to what God wants to teach you because, while you may think you know what the mission trip’s goals are, be prepared for God to reveal his goals for your life.

KEY QUOTE

“God isn’t looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him.”⁵⁴ — Hudson Taylor

TRY IT

Start by taking a trip with your church. If your church doesn’t offer an annual trip, talk to a pastor about leading one yourself. There are plenty of mission organizations you can partner with. You, in effect, will serve as the team catalyst to get people signed up. After that, the mission organization takes care of all the details.

I TRIED IT!

Emma, 20-something, about herself: “I’m a Starbucks Gold member.”

“You’ve probably heard other people say this, but it’s 100 percent

true for me. I went on our church's mission trip because I wanted to serve people in need. It turned out I was the one in need. Each village we visited I found joyful, giving people who cared for me—and they didn't have a thing! At least it seemed that way. They had the joy of Jesus so, really, they had everything.”

PRAYER

“Here I am, Lord. Send me.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Grow Artistically

Forty-three

All You Need Are ... SOME INVITATIONS

There's a reason the movie industry is a multi-billion dollar business—it reflects our thoughts, dreams, obsessions, and vices. Use movies to your advantage by hosting a movie night and lead a discussion afterward. Every movie has some kind of faith message that can be discussed, embraced, or challenged. Not only will the experience grow your own faith, it has potential to do the same for others.

KEY VERSE

Come and see what our God has done, what awesome miracles he performs for people! (Psalm 66:5, NLT).

Hollywood Bible

Filmmakers are modern day theologians. The big screen acts like a big spoon that serves the views and opinions of any film's creators. But that's OK. Whether a film's spiritual content is overt or covert, it can encourage meaningful discussion.

Regardless of whether the film chronicles Christians as heroes or fools, or the Bible as trustworthy or trite, use quotes and clips as talking points. That's why nearly any movie—*The Passion of the*

Christ, The Shawshank Redemption, or Religulous—all have value.

And spiritual movies not only catalyze discussion but also launch Bible studies. A movie like *The Da Vinci Code* raises lots of questions about the viability of the Bible. After some good discussion, why not suggest a three- or four-week follow-up Bible study? *The Adjustment Bureau* raises excellent questions on whether we have a free will or simply serve as pawns in God's universe. Follow up your discussion by inviting friends to a short study on the meaning of life.

The blessing of film is that it's a safe medium, in a familiar environment (whether your home or a theater), that raises relevant questions. So pass the popcorn, enjoy the movie, and try not to talk until *after* the movie.

KEY QUOTE

"Photography is truth. The cinema is truth 24 times per second."⁵⁵ — Jean-Luc Godard

TRY IT

Movie nights work well at the theater or in your home. View a film and follow it up with a discussion at a local restaurant's "meeting room." Some theaters offer similar rooms. Or find a relevant title on Blu-Ray or DVD to watch and discuss in your home. Team up with some friends who will not only help spread the word but also share responsibilities.

I TRIED IT!

Erin, 20-something, about herself: "I love sitting on the beach with a good book so I can take a nap."

"I haven't hosted a movie night yet, but I will. I attended one my church hosted and was impressed at the number of interested people as well as how easy it was. I'm not the best at thinking on my feet, so thought I could just ask a friend or two to help and we could serve as a discussion panel. That's not against the rules, is it?"

(Author note: There are no rules. I love the panel idea!)

PRAYER

"Heavenly Father, thank you for the skill and creativity of filmmakers. Use this medium to draw people to yourself. Give me courage to invite friends and wisdom in leading the discussion.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Forty-four

All You Need Are . . . SOME MARKERS

One of my most meaningful spiritual growth memories comes from a high school Bible study where the curriculum instructed Pastor Doug, Glenn, and I to *draw* Psalm 1. We did so on our own at home and then laughed hysterically when we reviewed the drawings together. We laughed at the different interpretations of the verses, the different ways we drew people, and, frankly, just because we enjoyed being with each other. But when the laughter was finished, we had *great* conversations about the verses. The drawings forced us to interact with the text differently.

KEY VERSE

Some skeptic is sure to ask, “Show me how resurrection works. Give me a diagram; draw me a picture. What does this ‘resurrection body’ look like?” (1 Corinthians 15:35, Msg)

Doodle

I attended a workshop led by Craig McNair Wilson several years ago. Conference attendees and I were greeted by a sign at the door that instructed us to put away our pens or pencils and pick up a crayon for taking notes. Huh? I looked around and everyone

else shrugged with a “Who knows?” look as we wondered what was going to take place.

Craig had us hooked before he even entered the room. We all wondered what he would say and why we couldn’t use a pen or pencil. That alone was impressive. Typically, I enter a class or conference checking my watch to see how long I have to be there, and I sit strategically by the door in case a quick exit is required. This time, I sat right in the middle of the class—completely hindering any subtle escape—and waited expectantly.

I’ve got to admit, that sense of wonder and excitement have all but escaped my spiritual life. I do things a certain way at a certain time in a certain place . . . and get bored. The problem isn’t with the things, the time, or the place. The problem is that overuse sucks the life out of them. Routine is helpful for establishing good habits or learning a new skill. But it can also be the death of whatever initially interested you.

When was the last time you read the Bible while sitting in a tree—or serenaded a loved one outside a window? Why do you drive to work the same way every time? Is it essential to put your left leg in your pants before the right leg? And whatever happened to suspenders or bow ties or leg warmers? Why not slip on one of those—or all three—once in a while? Did you know that nearly 100 percent of kindergartners believe they are creative? Sadly, by the time they reach high school, 70 percent believe the creative spirit is gone. There are plenty of reasons a person can list about what happens over that time, but instead of focusing on the past, place a crayon next to your silverware at dinner this week, with a blank piece of paper folded under the plate or sitting under the drinking glass. When questions begin about the crayon and paper, don’t give a reason. Just continue your conversation while you draw . . . or answer by making a drawing and then pass it around. What will happen? Who knows? Actually, *you* will, once you try.

KEY QUOTE

“There are flowers everywhere for those who want to see them.”⁵⁶ — Henri Matisse

TRY IT

Reading this book indicates you’re open to new ideas and want to grow spiritually, so you’re already ahead of the curve. However, this week use crayons or markers to write/draw a response to your Bible reading or sketch your prayers to God. How about illustrating a favorite Bible verse or drawing a picture of a verse you’re attempting to memorize.

I TRIED IT!

Kristen, 20-something, about herself: “I like to salsa dance and listen to show tunes on my iPod.”

“While I know I’m not supposed to say ‘I’m not creative,’ I think it’s safe to say I’ve never considered myself a creative person. And after trying this idea for a week, I still don’t. But it did help me think differently. Actually, it forced me to do so, and for that I’m grateful.”

PRAYER

“God, you are the creator of creativity. Help me to see you and the world before me with new eyes.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Forty-five

All You Need Are ... SOME GOOD HEADPHONES (CHEAP ONES WORK, TOO)

I like loud music, but this spiritual growth idea works at any volume. There is power in music—it can stir the soul, comfort the heart, and soothe the mind. It can also drive you crazy; it all depends on what you’re listening to. Johann Sebastian Bach gives great perspective on its influence: “Where there is devotional music, God with his grace is always present.”

KEY VERSE

*My heart, O God, is steadfast,
my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music (Psalm 57:7).*

Christian Living in Beat

I admit it. When driving my kids to school, I always try to play a worship song on the radio so they enter school with healthy lyrics in their head. I would’ve laughed at that practice years ago, but as I watch my kids grow and listen to all the noise competing for their attention, I no longer want to sit back and watch. I want inside this area of influence of their lives; thus, the last-second worship tune.

I remember walking my college campus with a Walkman (yes, there was life before the iPod) and being criticized because I was being anti-social, tuning everyone out. Evidently, I was sending a “keep out” message to those walking by. And, for the most part, I would agree. What my critics didn’t understand, however, was that I was also feeding my soul. Listening to Christian music allowed me to walk with purpose, to see people with new eyes and a new heart, to pray with conviction, to worship with strength. My headphones were a tool that provided energy to care, hope, and listen once I did take them off.

If you’re wanting to reenergize your soul, go to a quiet place and listen to the lyrics and the message of the songs. And as you listen, pray and praise the One who has given you life.

KEY QUOTE

“It behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”⁵⁷ — Ralph Waldo Emerson

TRY IT

Grab a notebook and some headphones. Sit in a quiet place or take a walk while you listen and reflect. Find your favorite worship song and listen to it two or three times. The first time, just relax and listen. The second time (and third, if possible), focus on the lyrics. Afterward, write a letter to God, sharing how you feel. Or simply write out your impressions. Is there something God wants you to know, do, or feel?

I TRIED IT!

Bob, 50-something, about himself: “I’m a big Yankees fan and love to vacation on Long Island.”

“I tried listening to my local Christian radio station for a week. I turned it on whenever I was driving, sitting in my office, or working out. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it. It helped me feel connected to the Lord all day. I kept going for another

week and then another . . . and I haven’t stopped yet. I need to feed my mind, so why not feed it with the Lord?”

PRAYER

“Heavenly Father, I want to focus on you more than I do. Thank you for the blessing of music. Use songs of praise to refocus me so that you get more of my attention.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Forty-six

All You Need Is ... A TICKET

Ever been in a mosh pit? If so, cool! If not, don't worry. You can enjoy the benefits of a concert without being passed overhead by complete strangers. Attending a Christian concert can be similar to going to church. Many artists use their talents for ministry and seek to incorporate encouragement and a biblical challenge into their shows. And, if you're lucky, you'll get to experience some great video effects and a light show. Don't forget to pick up a T-shirt.

KEY VERSE

David also ordered the Levite leaders to appoint a choir of Levites who were singers and musicians to sing joyful songs to the accompaniment of harps, lyres, and cymbals (1 Chronicles 15:16, NLT).

Front Row

I can think of numerous times live music has moved me to act, cry, hope, ponder, pray, and celebrate. There is power in well-crafted music, particularly when played live with a good sound system and visual effects. Live music is a performance. Some might shudder at that statement, wanting to defend music as stand-alone

art, but the moment musicians stand before a crowd with the hope that people will listen, they are performing with a desire to capture and hold an audience's attention.

I remember sitting in the front row of a balcony for a Delirious concert and being moved by the depth of lyrics, the artistry of performance, and the creativity used by incorporating well-made videos and beautiful lighting. All five of my senses were stimulated, but not just for effect. Rather, they served as continual reminders (even now, years later) of the role God needs to play in my life. That was truly an amazing show.

I have been to numerous concerts. Not every one makes an impact, but many do. So go with great expectations of both enjoying the show and hearing from God. And pray that the concert helps you know God in a more profound way.

KEY QUOTE

"Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise"⁵⁸
— Martin Luther

TRY IT

Go to a show to have fun, and lots of it. But see it as an opportunity to connect with God. Also, take advantage of the opportunity to invite some friends who might not usually go to church. Play some of the music of the artist you're going to see, and if your friend likes the singer or group, invite him or her along.

I TRIED IT!

Danny, 30-something, about himself: "I love American history and going to antique car shows."

"I'm a disc jockey, so I love music. But I didn't get into good, modern Christian music until I was in my late twenties. I like the contemporary stuff. I have a collection of CDs and worship to them mostly in the car. When I go to concerts, I get all my CDs out weeks before and play them on repeat; I like to have all the

songs and lyrics in my head so I can sing along with everyone. It's amazing how the Holy Spirit meets you when you worship, hands raised and calling out to God—I feel God's presence, his strength, and his peace.”

PRAYER

“God, you are the creator of music. You give inspiration and direction to artists. Help me hear from you through their words and melodies.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Forty-seven

All You Need Is . . . TO BORROW A CHURCH HYMNAL

Bring depth to your prayer life by reading through the lyrics of a church hymnal. Sometimes we just need a fresh perspective, and a hymnal can do that, especially if your church doesn't use one. If it does, you'll still find it beneficial, because you'll be forced to focus on the words rather than getting lost in the melody.

KEY VERSE

*He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God (Psalm 40:3).*

More Than a Nail Salon

Depending on your church background, a hymnal may be a new discovery for you, as evidenced by the student who thought a hymnal was the place men got their nails done. (Him-nail . . . get it? Crazy, right?) A hymnal is a book of hymns, or religious songs. Some churches have one in every seat (or pew), while others discarded them with the advent of the video projector. Whether you own one or not, get a copy. While I don't particularly care for the style of music that accompanies the songs, I love the words and worship they offer. I recently grabbed the hymnal in my home—

my wife is a fan—and flipped it open to just any page. I found these lyrics:

Jesus paid it all
All to Him I owe
Sin had left a crimson stain
He washed it white as snow.⁵⁹

There is beauty, power, and depth in those lyrics. They deserve meditation and offer the perfect stimulus for prayer. Those words remind me not only who God is but also the desperate condition I'm in apart from Christ.

Thankfully, church hymnals will live for many years, as they are the sole means of worship for many churches. But we all need access to a hymnal—they tell God's story in phrases that inspire.

King of kings
Lord of lords,
Jesus is Lord of all;
All my possessions and all my life,
Jesus is Lord of all.⁶⁰

KEY QUOTE

There appears to be a hymn for virtually every profession:

Dentists: "Crown Him with Many Crowns"

Contractors: "The Church's One Foundation"

Obstetricians: "Come, Labor On"

Golfers: "There Is a Green Hill Far Away"

Politicians: "Standing on the Promises"

Gardeners: "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"

Librarians: "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

Lawyers: "In the Hour of Trial"

Accountants: "Ten Thousand by Ten Thousand"

Clothiers: "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds"

Students: "Ask Ye What Great Things I Know"

Dry Cleaners: "O for a Faith That Will Not Shrink"

Credit Card Users: "A Charge to Keep I Have"

Weather Forecasters: "From Every Stormy Wind That Blows"

There's even a hymn for **Absent Church Members:** "Jesus, I Am Resting."⁶¹

TRY IT

Find a familiar hymn and read the words out loud. Pause frequently and think about a word or phrase that gets your attention. Pray about what comes to mind. Then try an unfamiliar hymn. What word or phrase motivates you to pray or praise God?

I TRIED IT!

Donna, 40-something, about herself: "I grew up in Sao Paulo, Brazil, am a mom of six kids, and a marathon runner."

"Hymns are fast becoming a 'lost art form' in many churches. But not for this worshiper! I am moved—completely moved—when I read the words, "Come Thou long expected Jesus, come and set Thy people FREE! From our sins and fears release us. Let us find our rest in Thee." WOW! I literally feel the longing in my chest when I read these words."

PRAYER

"God, I thank you for the amazing lyrics found in hymnals. They give fresh meaning to ancient truths. I pray a word or phrase will capture my heart today as I seek to live for you.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Forty-eight

All You Need Is . . . A LOVE FOR LEARNING

Read a church history book. Author Bruce Shelley describes a *Peanuts* cartoon he has outside his office door: “Charlie Brown’s little sister Sally is writing a theme for school titled, ‘Church History.’ Charlie, who is at her side, notices her introduction: ‘When writing about church history, we have to go back to the very beginning. Our pastor was born in 1930.’ Charlie can only roll his eyes toward the ceiling.” Shelley goes on to say many Christians suffer from “historical amnesia.”⁶² When attempting to reflect on significant historical events from the faith, we have a giant blank.

It doesn’t have to be that way. Our faith is filled with inspirational figures who lived courageous lives. There is much to be learned, and it’s available on your bookshelf or at a bookstore.

KEY VERSE

When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who

brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

History 101

A photo album is a history book filled with stories and laughter and pain and life lessons. Some pictures embarrass me: why did I wear that? Others inspire me: my trip to the Grand Canyon with my dad, the birth of my children, my wedding anniversary. Still, other pictures humble me: I remember smiling for a particular photo while struggling with depression. I worked hard to pretend I was doing OK, when in reality I was hurting. Pictures tell stories.

TV news and magazine covers tell stories too. They offer religion features that proclaim the latest archaeological discovery, church scandal, or cult belief. Movie trailers promote the revelation of Jesus’ supposed secret family, and you can even find an app that explains why the Bible is false. Why is this important? Because most of what is offered today as “breaking news” is simply a new coat of paint on an old story. When we take time to study history, we are not surprised by new discoveries and are able to discern how similar situations were previously handled.

I admit, many history books are best used as sleep aids. But that’s not true for all. Some publishers produce easy-to-read history books with short chapters that read like an action movie. Take time to flip through a church history book and see how issues from the past are being resurrected today.

KEY QUOTE

Question: “What do Catherine the Great, Attila the Hun and Jabba the Hutt have in common?”

Answer: “The same middle name.”⁶³ — Roger L. Welsch

TRY IT

Don’t think you have to read an entire book. History books can be pretty intimidating. Instead, find a section or a chapter or two

and jump in. Also, while there are some classic history books with incredible value, try one or two that have been published in the last five years. Those authors and publishers have made an effort to bring some enjoyment to the study of Christian history.

I TRIED IT!

Robert, 40-something, about himself: “I was once bitten by a prehistoric beast. While fossil hunting, I fell backwards onto a shark’s tooth which was pointing upwards . . . ouch!”

“It’s easy to think of the many inspirational figures in church history as exceptional characters without realizing that every Christian is called to live an inspirational life. I love the subtle humor of the saint who, having been thrown from her horse into a muddy puddle during a journey from one convent to another, said to God, ‘If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so many enemies!’ I also greatly enjoyed a book about the Fathers of the Desert. Few are called nowadays to escape from all human contact in order to find God—quite the opposite, if anything. However, the profound wisdom and spiritual insight of these early Christians I found very enlightening.”

PRAYER

“Heavenly Father, I want to grow in my faith. Help me learn from those who have followed you for years, those who have stories to tell of your faithfulness.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

More . . . Grow on Your Own

Forty-nine

All You Need Is ... TO BELIEVE GOD

It's one thing to know you did something wrong; it's another to confess it. The pit in your stomach or inner nudging to make things right is the Holy Spirit reminding you to confess your sin to God. The good news? Whenever you confess, God forgives. The bad news? It's tempting to not confess. Take God at his word and believe that he will forgive you.

KEY VERSE

But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness (1 John 1:9, NLT).

Stubbornly Foolish

There's a good stubborn and a bad stubborn. The good stubborn reflects a willingness to persevere and overcome obstacles, regardless of the cost. The bad stubborn? The dictionary says it best: "Having or showing dogged determination not to change one's attitude or position on something, [especially] in spite of good arguments or reasons to do so." I've been described as stubborn in the good way, but more often than I like to admit, I'm guilty of the bad kind, too. *Foolish*, another word occasionally used to describe

me, has a more pronounced negative connotation: “lacking good sense or judgment; unwise.” That definition doesn’t leave much room for a positive spin.

The day I refused to run back to the house to get my coat, I was stubborn. Considering the temperature was nearly freezing, I was also foolish. Stubbornly foolish.

Confessing sin to God is simply agreeing with God that his way is right while ours is wrong. It seems like an easy exercise, but the human will is amazingly independent. We are wired to stand tall, not submit. Standing up for yourself is a good stubborn. Standing up to God is not . . . and it’s foolish.

Consider the pros and cons of confession:

Pros

- You choose to obey God
- It proves you have an active faith
- You grow in your relationship with God
- Your transparency can inspire others
- There’s a greater probability of resolving potential conflict with others

Cons

- You wrestle with guilt
- Few get to know the real you
- You disobey God
- You are disbelieving God, doubting his Word is true even when it says he will forgive you

All of the Pros are difficult to do, but they prove beneficial and fruitful. The Cons are easy, but they’re also destructive. True spiritual growth is active and reflects a healthy relationship with God. Confession is one skill that’s crucial to develop; it’s a muscle that has the power to strengthen the whole body when exercised. Take time to talk with God today. Not only is he listening, he is eager to see you grow in faith. A good kind of stubborn? Responding to

an inner prompting to confess something to God . . . every time.

KEY QUOTE

The story is told of a traveling rabbi who was walking with some of his disciples when one of them asked, “Rabbi, when should a man repent?” The rabbi quickly replied, “On the last day of your life.”

“But,” protested several of his disciples, “we can never be sure which day will be the last day of our life.” The rabbi smiled and said, “The answer to that problem is very simple. Repent now.”⁶⁴

TRY IT

One reason people don’t ask God for forgiveness on a regular basis is because they don’t take time to stop and talk to God. This week, schedule a five-minute appointment with God every day of the week. If that seems challenging, schedule a one-minute appointment. At that time, ask God to reveal any unconfessed sin in your life. Then listen . . . and wait . . . and respond as needed.

I TRIED IT!

Kim, 30-something, about herself: “I recently fulfilled a life-long dream of swimming with dolphins.”

“I had a great first day of intentionally asking God to reveal any unconfessed sin. I sensed a greater intimacy just having begun my prayer with God in acknowledgement of my own brokenness. And then life got crazy, and I forgot to add confession to my appointments with God. Thank goodness that His forgiveness extends to me even when I forget to ask for it! Also, I am grateful that each morning offers me another opportunity to talk to God and be intentional in our relationship.”

PRAYER

“God, I don’t know if it’s my pride or my lack of faith, but I will no longer doubt your promise to forgive. Today, I confess the following . . .”

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Fifty

All You Need Is . . . A NOTEBOOK

Journal your faith. A notebook is a great place to share what you’re learning, or to write out questions, or to simply vent your frustrations. One of the many benefits of journaling is that you are documenting your faith. Write what you learned from your Bible reading, and if you’re ever asked to teach on that passage, you already have some thoughts written down. Or if you’re making a list of questions, you can keep track of which questions have answers and which are still plaguing you. Once you fill a journal, it’s fun to flip through it and review your journey with God.

KEY VERSE

How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?

How long will your wrath burn like fire? (Psalm 89:46)

No Cover

I went into my closet and pulled out the extra blankets, two suitcases, and a box of baseball cards I’ve had since I was a kid. I was looking for the box underneath those items, the one filled with memories from school yearbooks, photo albums, two pictures with broken frames, and five journals. Each journal was clearly labeled

with the date, but I didn't need to read the date. I knew each year based on the color of the notebook's cover or the condition of the notebook itself. And two of the notebooks no longer had covers—those were intense years.

The red one was the first notebook I ever used to talk about my faith. It was worn, as expected, but the pages inside were full of hope. I had plenty of questions scattered throughout—some of those questions remain unanswered today—but the majority of entries bubbled with talk about the power of God and the discovery of new verses. It was a book written with a smile.

The blue notebook had its cover ripped off long ago, then later reattached with tape. And by the looks of it, it had been reattached many times in different places. This was the second notebook I filled. It began as hope-filled as the first, but it included several pages with a giant question mark on them and the words “Why,” “How come,” and “I’m confused” written across the page. It was fun to look through that book because I remember each of those crisis situations like they were yesterday, but compared to what I deal with now in life, those circumstances seem insignificant.

The yellow notebook had all kinds of doodles on the cover. They weren't my drawings—just pictures by one of the guys in my Bible study who needed to draw in order to concentrate. (Or so he said.) I can't remember much about that year. Nothing stands out. The same can be said about the notebook's content. Just a bunch of random thoughts and Bible observations. Some good content, but it was lacking the personality of the others.

The final two notebooks were coverless. The last one lost its cover because I accidentally dropped it down a flight of stairs. I filled about one third of it and then tossed it in the box when we moved . . . years ago. I never pulled it back out and, consequently, don't have much written about my faith for several years. But the fourth notebook was the one I was looking for. This one lost its cover in a war, even though the notebook was defenseless. I threw it across the room in frustration. Oh yeah, those were some

fun entries to revisit. Lots of pain and frustration. Interestingly, though, amid the turmoil and emotions were threads of hope and confidence. It was different from the hope in the red notebook. This notebook's content felt deeper, more mature. It wasn't that the earlier notebooks were shallow, but this one was the most fun to read—and the most difficult.

KEY QUOTE

“One secret of life is that the reason life works at all is that not everyone in your tribe is nuts on the same day. Another secret is that laughter is carbonated holiness.”⁶⁵ — Anne Lamott

TRY IT

Don't be intimidated if you feel like you're not a writer. Keeping a journal is not writing a book; it's a personal document meant to be viewed only by you (unless you choose to share excerpts with people). And if the blank page is daunting, get a journal with small pages.

Another idea for people on the go: use an app such as Evernote. Evernote allows you to take notes on the road (via phone or similar device), and it syncs with your computer so you can copy and paste the text into an electronic document if you like.

I TRIED IT!

Julia, 50-something, about herself: “I love to travel! I’ve been all over the U.S. and to Canada, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Dominican Republic, England, Brazil, and Japan. This summer my family will take a cross-country drive to Idaho: next summer we hope to go to Italy!”

“I’ve always struggled to be consistent in journaling. I have several notebooks from early in my faith walk, that just end somewhere in the middle, begun at the outset of a big transition in my life and never finished. But in the last several months, I’ve found that getting my thoughts and questions onto paper really

helps me think through what God is saying to me. Even writing a Bible verse on the page helps me think more clearly about it. The best part is looking back through my entries at a later date and seeing how God answered prayer and deepened my understanding of Him or His word. Now I try to write every day, even if it's just a few words, because I find it so helpful."

PRAYER

"God, help me crystallize my thoughts onto paper. Help me see all you are doing in and around me.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Fifty-one

All You Need Is ... A SHOWER ...
OR A CAR ... OR THE WOODS ...
OR A CAREFREE ATTITUDE

Sure, singing at church is meaningful, but don't stop there. Let melodies remind you what's true about God, his love for you, and his plan for your life. You've sung in the shower, and you've probably cheered at a ballgame, so use that same energy to belt out praise to God.

KEY VERSE

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! (Psalm 95:1, ESV)

Top of the Charts

Ever wonder why you can remember lyrics to songs you heard on the radio 10 or 20 or 25 years ago, yet you have trouble finding your keys? Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine claim that, "Music is well-known to connect deeply with adolescents and to influence identity development, perhaps more than any other entertainment medium."⁶⁶

Influencing identity development is significant, especially when

you consider statistics citing that, of the 6.5 hours of daily media consumption by teens, nearly 2.5 of those hours are dedicated to music. A 2007 study by Saarikallio and Erkkila confirms that “good music has direct access to the emotions. As such it’s a fantastic tool for tweaking our moods.”⁶⁷ If music can influence our identity and tweak our moods, song selection is key.

Instead of fearing the power of music, why not harness it? Find quality Christian music that encourages, motivates, quiets, celebrates, and makes you dance. It may not be necessary to limit your listening to Christian music, but recognize the influence of music and be sure to feed yourself a healthy diet of biblical truth in the lyrics.

The University of Pittsburgh study acknowledged that “music represents a pervasive source of exposure to positive images of substance use. The average adolescent is exposed to approximately 84 references to explicit substance use per day and 591 references per week, or 30,732 references per year. The average adolescent listening only to pop would be exposed to 5 references per day, whereas the average adolescent who listens just to rap would be exposed to 251 references per day.”⁶⁸ Now, rap music is not the devil; it’s not what we’re pointing the finger at here. There are quality rap songs written by Christian musicians. But just like food consumption, you have to consider your diet.

Many believe quality Christian music to be an oxymoron. That’s not the case—there’s good stuff out there. In fact, you can visit this link to view a comparison chart identifying Christian artists who match other artists’ sounds you might be more familiar with:

<http://www.ministryandmedia.com/CCMchart/>.

I enjoy classic rock and songs from the 60s, 70s, 80s, and beyond. And while I enjoy belting out lyrics to “Stairway to Heaven” in the shower or in my car, I also want a healthy dose of truth in my music library that will provide actual steps toward heaven.

Sing loud. Sing proud. And sing to God.

KEY QUOTE

“Those who wish to sing always find a song.” — A Swedish proverb

TRY IT

Make a playlist of your favorite Christian songs and play it while you’re walking or running, or burn a CD to play in your car. Turn it up loud and sing with all you’ve got.

I TRIED IT!

Robert, 40-something, about himself: “I live on Malta, one of the smallest islands in the Mediterranean. It’s one-tenth the size of Rhode Island!”

“One uplifting experience I return to from time to time is listening to Mozart’s *Requiem* on full blast during a thunderstorm or while driving in the rain. For me, this music, more than any other, symbolizes our attempt through history to praise God through music. There is much more Christian music, though, which I listen to and find myself humming through the day. As a deputy headmaster in a 700-strong boys’ secondary school, it has often helped to remember significant verses from these songs while dealing with whatever the day chucks at me.”

PRAYER

“God, I’m a passionate person, and I want to direct that energy to you in word, deed, and song. Help me fill my mind with truths about you as I travel, daydream, or work.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Fifty-two

All You Need Is . . . TO STOP AND PRAY . . . IMMEDIATELY

Robin Williams' character in the classic movie *Dead Poet's Society* taught us all a small piece of Latin: *Carpe Diem*, or "seize the day." When it comes to prayer, this has never been more relevant. Don't get caught saying you'll pray for someone, only to forget a little later. If you're a good listener, people will share their prayer needs with you. If you're a committed Christian, you'll offer to pray. If you're smart, you'll do it right away.

KEY VERSE

Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found . . . (Psalm 32:6).

Good Timing

I kid you not, moments before writing this paragraph, I felt compelled to pray for a new friend. He had been feeling sick for a few days, so I sat and silently prayed for him. As I finished, I wondered what was stopping me from telling him I was praying, or even—get ready for this—taking two or three minutes to pray *with* him so he could participate? Ultimately, I rationalized my private prayer because I didn't know how he'd feel about my praying for

him, and I didn't want him to think I was "one of those" weirdo Christians. Pretty lame, huh?

Too many Christians, and I am one, have good intentions but poor follow-through. God's timing is perfect, however, and I can prove it. As I wrestled with my own lack of follow-through in life, I committed to ask my friend if I could pray for him the next time I saw him and . . . you guessed it, he just walked around the corner . . . (To Be Continued)

KEY QUOTE

I think I can, I think I could,
I think I may, I think I should,
I think I might, I think I will,
I think I better think more still.⁶⁹ — Susan Hambor

TRY IT

Ultimately, fear is what prevents us from doing the things we want. The good news is that we have a choice: we can fear what may or may not happen or we can fear God. When I look at it that way, I'm more easily motivated.

I TRIED IT!

Joel, 20-something, about himself: "I love to mountain bike and, once, as a teenager, I guarded a severely injured man overnight, in the San Juan Mountains, from wolves and coyotes while the others went for help."

"There have been a number of times I felt like I didn't know what I needed to do, even to the point of feeling frantic about things. But I'll stop and pray and, really, the answer I usually get is, just to have peace."

PRAYER

“God, I have a problem, and it’s me. Help me say yes to you right now and to follow through.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Curriculum Ideas

How to use *52 Ways to Grow Your Faith* in a group or class

OPTION 1: ELECTIVE STUDY (4-12 WEEKS)

Determine length of the group.

Group leader picks one spiritual growth idea per week for group to try. Or each group member picks new growth idea each week.

OPTION 2 : QUARTERLY STUDY (12 WEEKS)

Group leader identifies two growth ideas from each of the six categories, one per week.

Or group leader allows participants to select their own growth ideas.

A quarterly study can be repeated four times, without duplicating any material—many options!

OPTION 3 : YEAR-LONG STUDY (52 WEEKS)

Study one chapter each week

Lesson Template

LESSON 1

INTRO (5-10 min): Discuss the importance of spiritual growth, emphasizing ways we benefit when growing spiritually and that God **wants** to spend time with us.

PRACTICE (15-20 min): Pick a spiritual growth idea you can do right then! Give everyone time to try an idea, allowing them to stay in your group/class . . . or walking outside.

DISCUSS (15-20 min): Give people time to share what they experienced.

PLAN (5 min): Decide on a spiritual growth idea that everyone is to practice on their own during the week. For weeks 2 and following, use the lesson template above.

LESSONS 2 AND FOLLOWING

Each lesson has 5 key elements

5 minutes: Welcome

15 minutes: Review

10 minutes: Present

15 minutes: Practice

5 minutes: First impressions

Ideas for each section

WELCOME

Goal: Help people get settled and connect to one another

- Allow people to mix/mingle.
- Invite a few group members to share a highlight or challenge from their week.
- Share announcements pertinent to the group.
- Play a get-to-know-you game like ‘Would You Rather.’ (Use any discussion starter or talk trigger type of resource.)

REVIEW

Goal: Allow people to share previous week’s experience

- Remind everyone what the spiritual growth idea was for the week.
- Invite people to share their experience. [If participants had different ideas, make sure they explain it fully.]
- Follow up with questions like, “How did this idea help you grow?” “How did it encourage you?” “What did you find challenging about it?” “Would you modify the idea in the future?” “What did you learn about God? Yourself? The Bible?”

PRESENT

Goal: Present new spiritual growth idea

- Read the main chapter content and ask for feedback.
- Follow up the main content by having everyone read and look up the KEY VERSE. Discuss how the verse connects to the content.
- Read and discuss the KEY QUOTE.
- Ask group members if anyone has tried this idea or a similar one. Discuss.

PRACTICE

Goal: Provide time for members to practice the new spiritual growth idea

[Note: It’s possible the one for the week cannot be accomplished in or around the group or classroom setting. In that case, find one that can be practiced in the given setting, and use the other during the week.]

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Goal: Allow members to share first thoughts on the experience

[At your next gathering, members will be given a longer time to discuss in the REVIEW section.]

- Ask for highlights of the experience.
- Ask about any questions that arose from the experience.
- Pray for one another.

NOTE:

Mix up the lesson format from time to time (particularly helpful every 3-4 weeks).

Briefly introduce the spiritual growth idea at the beginning of class (approximately five minutes) and then provide 20 minutes of practice time. Conclude the class with a healthy debrief (20 minutes), followed by prayer.

Use *52 Ways to Grow* and *52 Reasons to Believe* together. When combining the books, use classroom time for the *Reasons to Believe* study (lesson available in that book) and provide a *Ways to Grow* idea as a take home opportunity. The spiritual growth idea experience can be discussed during the next gathering.

Endnotes

- 1 Packer, J.I. (1973). *Knowing God* (24). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
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- 4 IBID, 59.
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- 6 <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/andregide105039.html>
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Have doubts about the Christian faith? Confront your questions and disarm your doubt. **52 REASONS TO BELIEVE** is a devotional theology book, offering concise thoughts on the Christian faith. You'll learn what the Bible says about itself and the character of God, and discover how they relate to contemporary life. Learn on your own or with a group, but develop a stronger faith as you arm yourself with *52 Reasons to Believe*.

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- Key quote
- Did you know . . .
- Link to your life
- Small group discussion
- Key verse
- Prayer

If you liked this book by Gregg Peter Farah, you'll be pleased to know that there are other books in this series. Here is an excerpt from *52 Reasons to Believe*.

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The Bible Is . . . INFLUENTIAL

I read a story in which the author described his first trip to a former Communist country after the Berlin Wall came down. His publishing company brought dozens of cases of Bibles to be distributed at a trade show. When the doors opened, nearly all exhibits were ignored except for the one offering the free Bibles. They quickly disappeared, much to the disappointment of the hundreds who remained, begging for a copy. One man, the author describes, stood out. He was an older man, likely in his 70s, who stood beside the empty display, pointing at the pile of empty boxes stacked up behind the table. Unable to understand the man's language, the author asked an interpreter to explain that there were no more Bibles available. The interpreter talked with the man and then shared with the author, "He would like simply to have a box that carried the Word of God."

It can be easy to lose sight of the power and influence of the Bible when they're so readily available. Another author tells the story of a man in a small village in Poland who received a Bible from a traveler. Years later, the traveler returned and sought to find the man. He did and was pleased to discover that not only had the man become a follower of Jesus, but his entire family had as well,

along with many from the village. They gathered to worship and the traveler was astonished at how much Scripture the villagers had committed to memory. It turned out that, collectively, 200 of the villagers had the entire Bible memorized amongst themselves. About a dozen memorized the entire gospels of Matthew and Luke. Another knew the entire book of Psalms. When the Bible was shown to the traveler, its pages were hardly legible because it had become so worn with use. The words of President Theodore Roosevelt came to mind: "A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education."⁴⁰

Norman Geisler writes, "No book has been more widely disseminated and has more broadly influenced the course of world events than the Bible. The Bible has been translated into more languages, been published in more copies, influenced more thought, inspired more art, and motivated more discoveries than any other book in history."⁴¹ Indeed, billions of copies of the Bible have been published, making it the all-time best-seller. No book comes close to that kind of impact.

Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin offered this assessment, "The Bible is one of the most important documents in the history of civilization, not only because of its status as holy inspired Scripture, but also because of its pervasive influence on Western thought. As the predominant world view for at least fourteen centuries, Christianity and its great central text played a major role in the formation of Western culture. Consequently, many literary texts, even those in our post-Christian era, frequently draw on the Bible and the Christian tradition."⁴²

I've got good news. The world's most influential book is available for you to read, and its author is God. He's got some life-changing things to share. Interested?

KEY QUOTE

"An inspired work, the Bible is also a source of inspiration. Its impact has no equal, whether on the social and ethical plane

or on that of literary creation. We forget too often that the Bible pertains equally to the artistic domain. Its characters are dramatic, their dramas timeless, their triumphs and defeats overwhelming. Each cry touches us, each call penetrates us. Texts of another age, the biblical poems are themselves ageless. They call out to us collectively and individually, across and beyond the centuries.”⁴³
– Elie Wiesel, renowned novelist and Nobel Peace Prize recipient

DYK . . .

A microfilm packet containing Genesis 1:1 in sixteen languages and a complete RSV Bible were deposited on the moon by Apollo 14 lunar module commander Edgar Mitchell.⁴⁴

LINK TO YOUR LIFE

This is not a guilt trip but, hopefully, a wake up call: Keep track of the amount of time you invest consuming information. Whether it's news via the web, TV, or radio, tabulate how much time you listened or watched. Do the same for entertainment, whether movies enjoyed at a theater at home, or TV shows watched by yourself or with friends. Don't forget to include the time spent listening to music.

Now track the same amount of time you spent reading and reflecting on the Bible. If you're like me, that exercise is humbling. And it's not meant to force-feed more Bible into your life. Instead, it's important to evaluate what kind of influence we truly give the Bible in our lives. Now I hope you do stay culturally informed, enjoy your favorite TV shows, and sing your heart out to your favorite songs. But also take time to allow the God of the universe to invade your brain and soul. In fact, let the Bible serve as the filter for all you watch, read, and listen to.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Who or what are the current top influences in your life? Has that changed in the last five to ten years? Explain.

KEY VERSE

“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103)

PRAYER

“God, we live in an age that worships celebrities yet ignores Your Word. Forgive me for the times I've pushed the Bible aside. Give me an increasing understanding of the power and influence of the Bible, and I pray that it would influence me. Change me, God, through the power of Your word.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Twenty-nine

God Is a . . . REFUGE

In C.S. Lewis' classic series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, we meet a lion named Aslan, the true ruler of Narnia. When Lucy, a young girl, learns that Aslan is a lion she is frightened and asks, "Is he safe?" Mr. Beaver replies, "Course he isn't safe. But he's good." A perfect description of the powerful and loving Aslan, who is but a metaphor for our Almighty God. God isn't safe. He will bring judgment upon the world with all-consuming power. But He is good. He invites us to be in relationship with Him, and welcomes us in any condition. In fact, God is so good that He illustrated His love in the supreme sacrifice of Jesus.

Psalms 46:1 says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." The word *refuge* is used twenty times in the Bible to describe God. A refuge is a safe place to heal and renew, and it's also a fortification from which a counterattack can be launched. Other English words in the Bible that describe God include fortress, rock, shade, sheltering wings, shield, and tower.

Many people fear God, which is healthy and appropriate. But some take it too far and their fear prevents them from going to God when they've made wrong choices, or when they've been hurt by another. But the poets in Psalms and Proverbs and the prophets

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Joel want us to know that God is a refuge we can run to, a secure tower who will protect us and shield us from an enemy.

Mr. Beaver wanted Lucy to understand the awesome power of Aslan, but she also needed to know his character. In the same way, run to God who welcomes you and heals you so that He can then use you in the lives of others. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, "The ark was a great ark, which held all kinds of creatures; and our Christ is a great Refuge, who saves all kinds of sinners."¹⁰⁶

KEY QUOTE

"But the God of our fathers, who raised up this country to be the refuge and asylum of the oppressed and downtrodden of all nations, will not let it perish now. I may not live to see it . . . I do not expect to see it, but God will bring us through safe."¹⁰⁷ — Abraham Lincoln, weeks before the Battle of Gettysburg

DYK . . .

Horatio Spafford, the author of the hymn "It Is Well," wrote the lyrics while in extreme grief. In 1871, Spafford's son died and, months later, after investing heavily in real estate on the shore of Lake Michigan, he lost his family's financial savings when the buildings were destroyed in the Chicago Fire. Seeking solace for his wife and four daughters, he placed them on a ship to Europe, planning on meeting them in a few days. After being struck by another vessel, the ship sank in twelve minutes, with only his wife surviving. It was on the ship to meet his wife that he penned the words to the famous hymn.

"It is noteworthy, however, that Spafford does not dwell on the theme of life's sorrows and trials but focuses attention in the third stanza on the redemptive work of Christ and in the fourth verse anticipates His glorious second coming. Humanly speaking, it is

amazing that one could experience such personal tragedies and sorrows as did Horatio Spafford and still be able to say with such convincing clarity, 'It is well with my soul.'"¹⁰⁸

LINK TO YOUR LIFE

So what do you do when you feel depressed or beat up or alone?

- First, remind yourself repeatedly that you are not alone. Memorize Psalm 46:1, and recite it every time you doubt its truth.
- Second, talk to God about it. Pray or journal your thoughts and concerns.
- Next, sing to God about it. You don't have to write a song; instead, listen to worship songs so that you can keep your mind and spirit fixed on God and who He is. Our problems shrink when we focus on God.
- Finally, spend time with a friend. Share what's going on and ask your friend to pray for you. Do an activity with your friend to keep your mind and body busy.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Think back to a time you cried out to God for help. How did God answer you . . . or did he not? IS there a way you want or need God to be a refuge today? Share with the group.

KEY VERSE

"The Lord's voice will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth will shake.

But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a strong fortress for the people of Israel" (Joel 3:16, NLT).

PRAYER

"God, truths like this humble me and expand my view of you. Thank you for not only always being there, but for helping me heal and find renewed purpose.

Continue your prayer:

Amen."

Forty-two

Jesus Is ... COMMITTED TO US

I'd like to think I'd be committed to those I love, regardless of circumstances. But I'd have a hard time committing to strangers, or those I didn't love. Thankfully for all of us, Jesus is not like me. The apostle Paul reminds us that Jesus "loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:2). He was and is committed to us, no matter what.

Dave Roeber is a Vietnam vet who served as a forward gunner with the U.S. Navy's elite Brown Water, Black Beret. He was severely wounded when a white phosphorus grenade exploded six inches from his face leaving his body burned beyond recognition. Medics were able to stabilize his condition until he could be transferred and treated in a burn ward, back in the states. He looked forward to seeing Brenda, his new bride, but he was anxious for how she'd respond to his physical condition.

His worst fears materialized when a woman walked into the room.

Dave identified her as the wife of another injured man in his room, recognizing her from the picture displayed beside his bed. It was clear she was uncomfortable. She contorted her face and covered her nose from the smell of burnt flesh. Because the dozen

patients in the room were so disfigured, the woman could not recognize her husband. Dave watched her go from bed to bed, reading the name on the clipboard that hung from the foot of each bed. Finally she found her husband. After double-checking the name, she slowly walked up to him.

Dave had rehearsed what this scene might look like upon Brenda's arrival a million times in his mind, but of all the potential scenarios, Dave had not considered this one. The woman took off her wedding ring and placed it on the night stand beside her picture. As she turned to walk away, a nurse stopped her, asking her to wait before making such a drastic decision. Dave watched her push the nurse aside and say, "I couldn't be seen with him." She forever walked out of his life.

Dave was grateful his friend was asleep, but his own nightmare had just begun. Although he hoped Brenda would not respond the same way, he prepared himself for the worst. Brenda arrived the next afternoon, and Dave noticed the initial horror on her face everyone first exhibits, despite attempts to veil the shock. She, too, began going bed to bed, reading names to find him. Dave closed his eyes, not wanting to face the potential reality. He heard her approaching with slow, measured steps. Brenda wore the perfume Dave purchased for her before he left. Not able to wait any longer, he opened his eyes just as she kissed him on the worst part of his burned face and whispered in his ear, "Welcome home, Davey. Welcome home."¹⁵⁷

Jesus cares about your past, present, and future, and nothing will alter his commitment, regardless of your condition. Instead, be confident Jesus will whisper, and shout, and show that his commitment is eternal.

Welcome home.

KEY QUOTE

"It is this absolute confidence in Jesus' commitment to us that gives us the strength to live and die with Him, and to endure

whatever comes.”¹⁵⁸ — Larry Richards

DYK . . .

It’s important to evaluate to whom or what we commit, as evidenced by two marriages in recent years. In 2011 a woman married herself. (Yes, you read that correctly.) In 2007 another woman married the Eifel Tower, changing her last name to Eifel. Brian McLaren writes that “[Passion] can easily degenerate into sentimental or cheesy or hotheaded or hardheaded or softheaded, and too often it has done so.”¹⁵⁹ Jesus’ commitment isn’t sentimental or cheesy. He loves us, warts and all, and invites us to commit to follow Him.

LINK TO YOUR LIFE

Because of Jesus’ commitment, these are a few things we no longer have to worry about:

- solving every problem
- controlling every situation
- living with regret
- wondering if your relationship with God is secure
- giving up
- being overwhelmed by fear
- being good enough

In place of those worries, we are now free to trust, love, encourage, serve, give thanks, and dare to courageously follow God.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Talk about commitment: Where is it common in the world; where is it not? How’s your commitment to God these days? In what ways is it strong? In what ways would you like to see it improve?

KEY VERSE

“May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully” (Ephesians 3:19, NLT).

PRAYER

“Jesus, thank you for being one thing I can rely on in life. Your love never fails.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

Forty-seven

The Holy Spirit . . . EMPOWERS US

The human body is rather remarkable. Despite all of its intricate design and capabilities, maintenance is rather minimal. Granted, for optimum performance, proper care is required. But plenty of people survive with little to no physical or mental upkeep, as evidenced by humor websites like failblog.org.

It's not the same with our spiritual lives, at least not the way God intended. Romans 8:11 says, "The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you" (NLT). The Holy Spirit gives life and empowers us to live for God. In fact, according to that verse, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is available to me, too. Wow! I don't often live with that kind of understanding. What would my life look like if it were fully empowered by God?

The following reveals how God's Spirit is ready to empower us:

- power to witness—to show and tell the love of Jesus (Acts 1:8)
- power to serve (1 Corinthians 12:1)
- power to pray (Romans 8:26)
- power to overcome spiritual opposition (Matthew 12:28)

That list makes me realize I often ignore what God wants to do in my life because it's challenging or intimidating. It's easier to pursue "safer" Christian activities. But safer for whom or what? My reputation? I don't want to miss out on the Holy Spirit's power.

After Jesus fasted and was tempted in the desert, Luke wrote that Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit. Despite incredible physical and spiritual fatigue, God's Spirit empowered Jesus to minister. It would have been reasonable for Jesus to take a two-week vacation, or at least a comp day or two. Instead, he ministered, strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

There was a story in a Kentucky paper years ago about a local man who struggled to start his car. Upon further inspection, he discovered someone had stolen his motor! The good news is that for believers, God's Spirit isn't going anywhere. The Holy Spirit is ready to give our lives engine-like power. You and I just need to turn the keys to our spiritual lives and be willing to follow as God leads.

KEY QUOTE

"The early church was birthed into an environment of sorcerers, gods, goddesses, and many spiritual cults and religions. We are not facing anything new. We are not facing anything that the Holy Spirit of God . . . cannot overcome."¹⁶⁹ — Dan Kimball

DYK . . .

Romans 6:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 reveal two ways to live the Christian life. One is to be powered by our own thoughts and desires, the other by God's Spirit. While God has won the battle for the souls of those who will commit to him, the battle for the minds and bodies of men and women—even Christians—continues. Depending on when we have given our lives to Jesus, we have all those preceding years of habits focused on satisfying our own wants and desires. The Holy Spirit is working at changing those so they're now consistent with God's will for our lives . . . but it is a

battle. The good news is that just as God has won many hearts for eternity, he can win the moment-by-moment battles.

God's Spirit will give us all the power we need, but we need to follow him.

LINK TO YOUR LIFE

In his commentary on Romans, Bruce Barton offers excellent tips on allowing the Holy Spirit to empower our lives:

- “Ask for greater openness and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit’s guidance.
- Consciously humble ourselves before God, so we are not too proud to change.
- Look to God’s Word for guidance.
- Obey where we have clear direction, so that our forward movement will enhance the Holy Spirit’s leading. (It makes little sense to steer a parked car!)

When was the last time you prayed as Jesus did, “Nevertheless, may your will, not mine, be done”?¹⁷⁰

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

What are some things or areas in your life that just seem . . . impossible to change? What if, with God and his Spirit, you could begin to change them?

KEY VERSE

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NLT).

PRAYER

“Holy Spirit, Thank you for the choices you provide, the invitation to follow you moment by moment. Help me choose you today, all day.

Continue your prayer:

Amen.”

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