

Beginning Your Time With God

Keep in mind that what God wants is a relationship with you. Growing close in a spiritual relationship is similar to that of a physical relationship in several ways:

- All intimate relationships require time. The less time we spend with someone, the less intimate our relationship is with them. The more time we regularly invest, the closer we grow.
- All intimate relationships require honesty and vulnerability. When we try to hide things or deceive the other person, our relationship always suffers.
- All intimate relationships require honoring the other person. When we do things that honor the other, intimacy increases. When we do things that dishonor or offend, intimacy diminishes.
- All intimate relationships require faith. Relationships aren't formulaic. You trust the other person's character and integrity. The closer you grow, the more you're able to trust the other's intentions and actions.

When we adhere to these principles, relationships—even with our Heavenly Father—flourish. When we violate them, the intimacy dries up.

On the other hand, a relationship with God is different from a relationship with another person in that we don't perceive God primarily through our physical senses. We don't readily see him, hear his audible voice, or touch him physically. Sometimes this is frustrating—we long to be with God without the distractions and obstacles of this world and its physical limitations.

Part of developing a closer connection to God is learning to hear his voice, training your ear to his presence. This is one of the best parts of following Christ. One Sunday I played a recording of a man's voice reading Scripture. I asked if anyone knew the identity of the man. My sister, who was in attendance that day, raised her hand—the voice belonged to our brother. Why were she and I the only ones who could identify our brother's voice? It wasn't because we have some special power or ability. It was simply because we've spent lots of time with our brother.

The more time you spend with Christ, the more you'll begin to discern the voice and presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. Don't get discouraged if, after a week, you don't receive some grand revelation, trust that as you spend time in prayer and reading the Bible that God is making himself known to your soul. As you continue to pursue him and spend time regularly quiet before him, you'll grow in your awareness of his leading.

Time In The Morning Or Time At Night?

My recommendation is that you strive to spend time with God each morning. Making time for him as your first activity of the day does at least two things:

First, it prepares you for the day. There's something powerful about starting your day on your knees with Christ. In a real sense, I believe it gives the Holy Spirit time to fill you up. In the morning your mind is less cluttered and hasn't engaged all that has to be done in the day yet. I get up before it's light and before the kids get going. There's a sense of peace and stillness that facilitates my being still before God.

Secondly, having a devotional time in the morning starts your day with a sense of accomplishment. You've done something good and right. No matter what else happens during the day, you'll know that you started out right and had your priorities in order.

Understand What's At Work When You Spend Time With God

Begin your time knowing that God is pleased. He's excited that you're taking him up on his offer to be with him. He knows (far better than you do) that this is the best investment of your time you could possibly make. He made you in order to know you. He's glad you're here.

I say this because the last thing Satan, our spiritual enemy, desires is for you to put yourself in the position of being spiritually renewed. He hates the thought of your humbling yourself before God, confessing your sins, and being strengthened by God's Word.

So what does Satan do when you decide to spend time with God: He lies. After all, he's the father of lies (John 8:44). Here are some of his favorite lies:

- You're so inconsistent in your time with God. What makes you think he'll just show up today?
- You've done such ugly things lately that there's no way God's going to respond to your trying to be with him. You're dirty and shameful, and God knows it. He's got more people far more holy than you with whom to spend time.
- This is all a mind game—this whole “spending time with God” thing. You can't see him, hear him, or touch him. How do you know he's even real? How stupid you look on your knees talking to yourself!
- You need thirty more minutes of sleep more than you need time with God. You've got a busy day ahead and God wants you to be rested so you'll do your best. Sleep in and start spending time with God tomorrow.
- This is all a waste of time. There's nothing special about you that would make God reveal himself to you. That sort of thing is for pastors and people like that, not for average people like you. Just rely on those who are more “enlightened” to pass their knowledge on to you.

Satan's got an endless supply of lies that he loves to plant in your mind. He wants to distract you, discourage you, and do anything he can to keep you from growing closer to the God who made you and loves you.

With this in mind, here's a simple and effective approach to growing in your relationship with Christ.

5-5-5

Spending time with God. 5 minutes of worship, 5 minutes of Bible reading, 5 minutes of prayer. Beginning with this will give you a solid platform on which to build a more intimate relationship with God. Don't be surprised if you find 5-5-5 becoming 10-10-10.

To start, get on your knees in a quiet place where you'll be undisturbed. There's something about being on my knees that helps my heart and mind be humbled before

the Lord. It reminds of who he is and who I am. There's nothing magical about it, but if you can do it comfortably, I recommend it.

Declare your intentions in prayer. Tell the Lord that you desire to know him more...that you want to walk in his ways...that you desire to hear his voice this morning. Rebuke or reprimand Satan even before he begins his barrage of lies, "Satan, I rebuke in Jesus' name. You have no place or right to be here. I have no power of my own, but by Jesus' power, I resist you and humble myself before God." (James 4:7)

5 Spend 5 Minutes Confessing Your Sins and Worshiping God. Ask the Lord if there's anything in your life that prevents you from knowing him more. Is there any thought pattern, behavior, or way of speaking that is outside of his will? Think back over the previous day or week. Be still and quiet for a moment. Give the Holy Spirit time to reveal any obstacles to intimacy. (e.g. lust, hatred, anger, worry, fear, unholy language, etc.)

When something comes to mind, don't deny it or rationalize it. Confess it. God already knows, but just like in human relationships, when we offend someone, admitting our wrong is part of reconciling. Confess your sin to God and turn away from it.

Example: Lord God, I confess giving in to anger yesterday. I blew up at my kids and said things I shouldn't have in a way I shouldn't have. Father, I don't want to be like that. I want to repent (turn away) from my anger, Lord, and turn to you. I want to live in a manner that brings honor to you and makes you proud. Thank you for loving me in spite my weakness. Thank you for forgiving me.

You don't have to beat yourself up or pay some kind of penance before God will respond to you. God wants you to trust that he will receive you back. All he requires is a contrite heart. (Psalm 51:17)

Thank God for his faithfulness...for the atoning death of Christ that makes you able to be in right relationship with him. As you thank him, recall the ways that God has blessed you or made himself known in your life.

Tell God who he's been to you. Sometimes it can help to read a Psalm and see how King David describes and speaks to God. If David says that God has been his refuge, quietly think of how God has been a refuge to you. Call those instances out to God. Praise him for who he is.

Example: Lord God, you've been a refuge to me. When I was going through that terrible transition time at work and I wondered if I was going to have a job, you brought me through. You preserved me. You gave me strength to stay focused and to not let my worry turn into impatience with my family. Thank you for being my refuge. You're a comforter. You're the God who forgives. I bless your name, O Lord.

If you read a description of God in the Psalms that is new to you or one that you haven't experienced, ask God to reveal himself to you in that way. Spend a few moments quiet again. Give God room to make himself known to you.

Quietness and stillness are powerful ways to encounter God. Don't rush through them or neglect them.

5 Spend 5 Minutes Reading the Scriptures. One of the ways to get the most of being connected to a church, is to dwell upon the passage of Scripture that will be preached upon the following Sunday.

Each day leading up to Sunday, read the passage of Scripture two times. The word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:2). As you read it each day, the Holy Spirit will begin to work in your life to reveal the truth and power of Scripture to you. When you come on Sunday, you'll have given the Holy Spirit six days to prepare your heart and speak to you about the passage. You'll be amazed at how rich and powerful our time together on Sunday will become.

After you read the passage once, be still and quiet again. Give the Holy Spirit time to impress upon your mind anything he desires about the Scripture you've read. Then, read it again.

Pick out what you think is the most significant portion or thought. Remind yourself of it during the day. Memorize the verse on the back of the Knowing Christ More Bible Study. Recite the verse in your mind out loud each day before you turn the radio on in your car and before you go to bed.

If you want more time in the Bible, you can do these things:

- Work through the Knowing Christ More study. It only takes about 10 minutes each day.
- Read through a book of the Bible. Start with John and read one chapter each day.
- Get a devotional book at a Christian bookstore.
- Join a group Bible study with our men's or women's ministries

5 Spend 5 Minutes Praying for Yourself and Your Oikos. Lift up your requests before God. Call upon his Holy Spirit to bring the power, love and self discipline to live a holy life. Ask him to break the chains of bad habits and sin in your life. Speak your specific requests to him.

Example: Lord, you know that today I've got to pursue the insurance company that rejected our medical claim. I want to surrender this to you. More than anything else, Lord, I want you to be glorified. I give you room in this situation. Give me strength to control my anger and my words. Lord, I pray that you'll help the company see their error and the legitimacy of our position. Move in the heart of the decision makers to cover this procedure. In all things, Lord, I will praise you. You have given me more than I could ask or imagine. I trust you with this.

Pray for your Oikos. Beginning with your family, then with others, intercede on their behalf before God. Pray specifically for what you know to be their struggles.

Rather than getting stuck in the routine of asking God to "help", use other words that require you to think more deeply. Ask God to bless, to empower, to break, to restore, to reach, to hold, to comfort, etc.

Make a point to pray for someone in your Oikos who doesn't know Jesus' love.

Example: Lord, I know that you love Sherry. You died for her because you wanted her to be with you forever. Father, would you break through the things that keep her from

recognizing your love? Reveal yourself to her in an undeniable way so that she'll turn to you. She struggles with anxiety—Lord, I know you want to bring her peace. Lord, I give you room in my life to bless Sherry. Use me any way you want. Give me eyes to see how I can care for her needs and open the door that I might share with her naturally about your love.

Other ways to spend time with God:

Any routine can get old. I love my wife, but if I only took her out to the same restaurant and the same movie every week, out time together wouldn't be very significant. Likewise, it's important to incorporate different ways of spending time with God into your life. Here are some other things you can do:

Journaling—Purchase a journal and write down your thoughts or prayers to God. Record the ways that you've seen God work in your life, what you're learning, and ways in which you're growing. This will be a good way to remind yourself of God's faithfulness during difficult times.

Fasting—Fasting is more about focusing upon God than it is about abstaining from food. If you're fasting, use the inevitable hunger pangs or thoughts of food to serve as an alarm clock, reminding you to thank God for who he is and to reposition yourself before him. (For more info on fasting, go to the resource page at www.CrossBridgeCommunityChurch.com)

Sing or listen to Christian music—Go to the Christian bookstore and pick up a worship CD. Listen and dwell upon the words of the song as it describes God.

Memorize Scripture—You'll be amazed at how relevant and timely Scripture becomes as you commit it to memory. The Holy Spirit will bring it to mind during difficult times or in times that others are struggling. Start by memorizing the Scripture on the back of the Knowing Christ More Bible Study. Another great resource is the book, *Topical Memory System*, available at www.Navpress.com.

Read Through the Bible—To grow your understanding of the whole Bible, read through it over the course of a year. The following website provides several approaches: http://www.backtothebible.org/devotions/bible_guides.htm

Worship Through Artistic Expression—Write a poem or a song, draw or paint. Create a book or other piece highlighting your own faith story or your experience of God's grace. Be creative; God made you in his image.

Find a Peaceful Outdoor Spot—Focus on the amazing creation around you. Dwell on the unfathomable creativity and love of our Creator. Take it all in—the sights, sounds, and smells of the natural world and become aware of God's character in the midst of it.

Explore a Bible Commentary—After reading a Scripture passage or book of the Bible, read the commentary of a biblical scholar. You can purchase commentaries some at a Christian bookstore or access some free at: <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/> If you use the online commentaries, I recommend those by Mathew Henry, John Calvin, and John Wesley. If you purchase one, consider the *New American Commentary Series* by Broadman.

In Summary

I can't emphasize enough how important daily quiet time with the Lord is. Time together is the foundation of every solid, growing relationship. Remember, also, that every relationship grows richer over time. A newly wed couple is just as married as a couple celebrating their golden anniversary, however the older couple knows each other at a depth that only comes through time and experience. Expect your relationship with God to grow over time.

Lastly, I find that I always run faster when I'm running with someone. By joining a Life Group, you'll be connected to a group of people who love each other and help one another follow Christ more diligently. I believe this to an essential part of spiritual growth.