

Can I Pray My Way to Happiness?

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 1

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There was once a strong young man who took a job as a woodcutter. He took on that job for all he was worth. The first week he turned 18 trees into firewood. The second week, he worked just as hard, but was surprised he chopped only 11 trees. The third week, he worked just as hard again, and despite working nonstop from dawn until dark, his number was six. Despairing, he went to his foreman to offer his resignation: “I’m losing strength. I can no longer cut as many trees as I once did.” The foreman looked at this strapping young man who was the picture of health. He said, “Have you ever thought of sharpening your ax?” “Sharpen my ax?” snapped the young man indignantly. “Who has time to sharpen an ax? I’ve been too busy chopping wood.”

As obvious as is the lesson in this little parable, the logic here is often lost on people like you and me. Our answer to everything is to work harder and run faster. When things aren’t going well we work even harder and run even faster with places to go, people to see, and things to do.

This morning I challenge you to spend time sharpening your ax. What if instead of just working harder, you started working smarter by spending ten minutes a day in the presence of God, meditating on scripture and in prayer? Use *The*



Handbook to Prayer we've given you to do so over the next six weeks.

The Challenge

Now I know, if you're like me, you wake up in the morning feeling like you're already two hours behind: "No matter how hard I work I'm hardly going to make a dent in all the things that are screaming for my attention today. So I'd better hit the ground running." So you do, but then comes this stab of guilt: "What about prayer, time with God, devotions?" But stopping feels like a momentum killer. You feel like a quarterback forced to take an unwanted time-out on the five yard line.

But what if prayer isn't a time-out? What if prayer is the game changer—the ultimate offensive weapon? More than just sharpening your ax, Jesus said, prayer moves mountains. Prayer brings about the very things we're yearning for, working toward, and dreaming of. If so, the dumbest thing in the world is to be too busy to pray.

So here is the challenge and the promise. Spend 10 minutes a day with *The Handbook to Prayer* for the next six weeks and I promise on October 25, six weeks from today, your life will be deeper and richer and more meaningful. If it isn't, that Sunday you can come yell at me and tell me this was a big rip-off. But I am not worried; studies show daily devotions do make a difference. I'll be straight up with you: the magic number is four. For some reason having devotions at least four or more days a week is the tipping point for impact and spiritual growth. Somehow less than the majority of days in the week has no effect.

So why this book? Notice the subtitle of this book, "Praying Scripture Back to God." There's no more important spiritual discipline you can have in your life than praying scripture back to God. This is Ken's genius. And believe me Ken

is a genius—with a PhD in physics from New York University and a PhD in Philosophy from Oxford plus a degree in Astronomy from Case Western. (One reason you should believe in God is because Ken Boa believes in God. He's a lot smarter than any atheist friend you may have—but that's another sermon.) Ken's genius in this book is he turns all the Bible into devotional literature. You'll be reading scripture and it will say in the third person, "God is great." Ken takes those words and says, "Lord, you are great." And there is breathtaking power in praying God's own words back to him.

The Doorway to Prayer

Why this is so came home to me while I was reading Psalm 1—the very first psalm. Psalm 1 is psalm one for a reason. The book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible. Psalm 1 is the doorway to prayer. It may have actually been composed for the purpose of leading into the Book of Psalms.

The theme of Psalm 1 is: what is the good life? How can I be happy? The answer is simple. You meditate on God's Word to the point of delight. You pray scripture back to God, which changes you from the inside out. With what outcome? The first word says it all: blessedness – a state of total well-being. The life you always dreamed of comes as you interiorize God's word.

And if you don't? Here the Psalmist is brutal. It's a disaster.

Verse 1 says, "Don't do this," then verse 2 says, "Do this." Then verses 3–6 say, "If you do this, good things will happen; if you don't do this, bad things will happen."

Let's look at the very first Psalm.

¹ *Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked*

*or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams
 of water, which yields its fruit in season
 and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers.*

⁴ *Not so the wicked!
 They are like chaff
 that the wind blows away.*

⁵ *Therefore the wicked will not stand
 in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

⁶ *For the LORD watches over the way of the
 righteous, but the way of the wicked
 leads to destruction.*

Filled with Chaff

My grandpa on my father's side was a wheat farmer in Montana. Summers, we kids loved going up there and traipsing those 2,000 acres with our 22s and going skinny dipping in the creek. But one thing we hated about grandpa's was when they harvested the wheat. Around would come this big thrashing rig that blew straw through the air and these tiny little hollow husks of chaff would go down the back of our shirts and stick to our sweaty skin. We would get itchy and uncomfortable, and it was awful.

Here our psalm says even in Bible times people hated chaff. It was good for nothing but to be blown away. And the Psalmist says a life without God is chaff. Only the Psalmist here isn't talking about believing in God. He's saying unless your life is connected to God in a life-giving way, it is chaff. A chaff person isn't an evil person—just busy, preoccupied and secular.

I don't know about you but I have days when I feel like my mind is filled with chaff. I have so

many useless, silly, mindless things taking up space inside my head—like the lyrics to all the dumb songs I've heard through the years and can't get out of my mind. I was thinking the other day, why do I know all the words to the song "Love Potion Number 9" by the Coasters?

*"I took my troubles down to madam Ruth/
 she is that gypsy with the gold capped tooth/
 she's got a pad down at 34th and Vine/selling
 little bottles of Love Potion Number Nine/ then
 she bent down, turned around and gave me a
 wink/ said I'm gonna mix it up right here in the
 sink/ it smelled like turpentine and looked like
 India ink/ I held my nose, I closed my eyes, I
 took a drink/ I didn't know if it was day or
 night/ I started kissin' everything in sight/but
 when I kissed the cop down at 34th and
 Vine/ he broke my little bottle of Love Potion
 Number Nine."*

Why isn't it Psalm 139 instead of Love Potion Number 9?

That's chaff; the lightweight fluff from the world is always pouring into our heads, bombarding us nonstop until we turn it off. But do you know what Dallas Willard says? "What simply occupies your mind determines what you will do. Choose the right mental focus and your actions will follow." How many moments this next week will God occupy your mind? How differently might you treat people if God commandeered more of your thoughts?

We're talking about taking charge of your day by proactively filling your mind with God's truth. Isn't that exciting?

Two Kinds of Life

This Psalm says there are only two kinds of lives, and it's all or nothing. Either you are a lush green tree planted by a stream of water bearing fruit in your season or you are chaff.

The Psalmist doesn't say the ungodly person is a small bush and the godly person is a tall oak. No—either you're a massive redwood or you're a tumbleweed. You've got it all or you've got nothing.

And what makes the difference? Prayer. Time alone with God will give your life the beauty and strength of a mighty oak. That's what the Psalmist is saying about this tree. Its root goes all the way down deep into underground streams of water.

In our yard we have an ongoing mini-drama because a few years ago my wife Becky got a rainwater harvest system that drains the run-off from our property into these big tanks on the side of our house. We use the water to irrigate the plants on our property. It seemed like a brilliant idea because of the skyrocketing cost of Atlanta city water. There's only been one slight problem: it always seems to break down when we go on vacation. If a week goes by without rain, like it says in verse three our leaves "wither." The plants droop. But here's what's interesting: we also have 70-foot hardwood trees at the back of our yard and they don't skip a beat. Why? Their roots go down so deep they tap into underground water.

That's what the Psalmist is saying. The ups and downs of circumstances don't threatened deeply rooted trees or deeply grounded people. Those who meditate on God's word are like those tall trees.

If there's a dry spell like out in California, no problem. If a Katrina blows through, they stand tall. We had a mini-tornado rip through our neighborhood a couple of years ago that cut a swath of toppled trees, but they were already dead and or damaged. The healthy trees bent but didn't break - and neither will you if you send down your roots deep into God's word. You'll be like a tree planted by streams of water.

"Inside Out" is a delightful Pixar movie featuring Riley, an 11 year old girl forced to move cross

country when her father joins a start-up out in San Francisco. Riley has to leave behind her beloved hockey team and hates San Francisco where she's lonely and miserable. "Inside Out" tells her story from the viewpoint of five emotions inside her mind: fear, joy, sadness, disgust and anger. They are always trying to control Riley on the inside. Maybe you hear those voices inside you as well:

Isn't that brilliant? We have these raging emotions and feelings inside us that are grabbing for control of our lives. One minute it's anger, then disgust, fear, sadness, joy. And that's just between here and getting downtown on the connector. Imagine if every day you could put God in control, firmly in charge. Oh, he'll bring in the emotions—mostly joy, a fruit of his spirit—but also fear and sadness and anger, in ways that are helpful and loving.

Walking through Day 1

But now let's look together at this book we've given you this morning. Turn to page 17, day one. We're going to walk through day one. Let's read together out loud the prayer of adoration. By the way, these books in your hands show our earnest prayer. On Friday afternoon they were sitting in a freight container just arrived from South Korea. We were on our knees.

*O Lord, our Lord,
How majestic is Your name in all the earth!
You have set Your glory above the heavens!
(Psalm 8:1)
Great and marvelous are Your works,
Lord God Almighty!
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!
Who will not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name?*

*For You alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship before You,*

*For Your righteous acts have been revealed.
(Revelation 15:3-4)*

Do you see what you've just done? Prayer is an act of decentering the self. You have downloaded spiritual software into your brain at the start of your day that says, "There is a God and it's not me. There is a CEO of the world and I'm not him—whew!"

And what a God he is! Look at the words: "Majestic," "glory," "great," "marvelous," "righteous," "true," "king," "holy." So many voices will be trying to get inside our head and we've got the jump on all of them by putting God up there first.

"O Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth." Sociologists have a theory called the looking glass self: that you become what the most important person in your life thinks you are. Imagine every morning looking at yourself through the lens of how God sees you so you go through your day thinking of you the way God thinks of you—as someone so important that God wants to do life with you. You live before the audience of one.

So life is all about God. Oops. I'm all about me. So next we move to Confession, there at the bottom of the page.

C.S. Lewis said if you are in the presence of God you are going to feel one of two ways: either you feel like a small dirty object or you will lose thought of yourself altogether. Then he said the latter is by far preferable. In other words, don't spend this time beating yourself up. Just get your stuff out onto the table before God and deal with it.

Sometimes we say, "Lord, that thing I did yesterday—forgive me." Then it's "Oh, that thing I did two days ago..." Then, "Oh Lord, that thing I did a month ago." No. Just trust in his grace and forgiveness. Look what our book says: "Ask

the Spirit to search your heart and reveal any areas of unconfessed sin," then "acknowledge these to the Lord and thank him for his forgiveness."

And then move on to Renewal; that's what life is all about. And what a beautiful verse here: "O Lord my God, may I fear you, walk in all your ways, love you and serve you with all my heart and with all my soul." (Deuteronomy 10:12) Don't feel like you always have to read both these prayers every day either. These are springboards to launch you into your own prayers.

Now comes the heavy lifting: Petition. Notice the heading: "Growth in Christ." Today's prayers are, "Lord Jesus, give me a greater desire to know you and to please you," and "Lord Jesus, give me a greater love and commitment to you," and, you can see, "the grace to practice your presence and grace to glorify you in my life."

From there you can go back to that I Corinthians verse at the bottom of page 18. Maybe a phrase jumps out at you, especially the last one: "May I glorify God in my body." Meditate on that phrase. Go deep into those words. Send your root down into this scripture. Pray over that phrase: "Lord, take my body; use my body; I offer you my body this day - my fingers, my toes, my eyes, my heart. From the tippee-top of my head to the bottom of my toes, I'm all yours." '

What's the next phrase? Do you see? "My activities for this day." What I do is I pull out my iPhone calendar and go right down my schedule, lifting up my appointments, my meetings and all my activities to God. What that's like reminds me of a story I read about salesman who piloted a small plane as he went from place to place. For years he'd driven the same routes and he knew the roads like the back of his hand. But now he was flying low, sometimes over these narrow winding roads

that he'd driven for years. He'd look down and see this poor little car behind this great big truck. The truck would be going 20 miles an hour on this road where the speed limit was 55, but on this winding road the car didn't dare pass. Why? He couldn't see what's ahead. So the pilot was up there saying, "Gosh, if the guy only knew there's no car coming for a mile or so, if only I could communicate with him, if only I could tell him what I see from my vantage point, then he'd know what to do."

When I pray through my coming day I'm lifting up my activities to the pilot. He can see it all. He knows what's coming; he knows what's around the bend; he knows the things I might do that would turn out to be suicidal. He can also see that I've got places with room to zoom that I don't even know about. I want to hear this voice. I want to obey his word. Our book says of the one who meditates on Scripture, "Whatever they do prospers."

Petition is praying for me. Next is Intercession—praying for others. There's a brief verse, then the book says "Churches and ministries" and under that, "my local church." That would be Peachtree. We need your prayers! Then it says "other churches"—that always reminds me to pray for our dear Bryan Dunagan at Highland Park in Dallas, whom we saw grow up right here at Peachtree. I have friends in other churches. You may have other churches you pray for along with Peachtree.

Next is Affirmation, Each day there's a chance to ponder a great truth of our faith—here it's the cross and atonement. Spend as much time or as little on Affirmation as you desire.

Then Thanksgiving. After two scriptures our book says, "Pause to offer your own expressions of thanksgiving." David Brooks calls thankfulness "happiness on steroids." It is so mentally healthy for you to do what the old hymn says: "Count your blessings, name

them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." For me that means every day praying for my family and naming each of them by name in the presence of God—my wife, my children and grandchildren, every morning in thanksgiving or in intercession (I suppose depending on whether they're being a joy or being a pain at that moment). If you look at day 2, tomorrow, a couple pages over, you'll see the Intercession is for family.

I know I say this again and again. There are blessings up in heaven with your name and your family's name on them that are warehoused in a cosmic distribution center and there they sit collecting dust until we pray them down into their lives. I have a very strong sense every morning when I get up that as a husband and father I am gypping my wife Becky and my children and grandchildren on any day I do not pray for them. Because of my role as her husband, there are unique blessings only I can pray down into Becky's life. As a father, I and I alone am privileged to pray down certain blessings into my children's lives. As pastor, there are prayers only I can pray for our congregation. There are prayers only you can pray for your employees, for your business, for your family.

God wants nothing more than to open the windows of heaven and pour out his blessings upon his children. But as Scripture says, "Ye have not because ye ask not."

The dumbest thing in the world is to be too busy to pray. You need time alone with just you and God every day. Mine is in the morning before I open any work document on my computer. One thing I'm trying now is looking at Facebook before I pray. There's all this fodder for intercession—fresh breaking news from friends and family, birthdays and anniversaries. I have a dear friend from 30 years ago and his wife is having surgery for a tumor on her brain. I'm praying for Claudia. And you can also read

between the lines: “Oh, Lord, this is their fourth selfie in three days. They must be feeling a little insecure, Jesus. Bless their heart.”

Now finally the closing prayer from Psalm 73. Think of it. Before you walk out of the door in the morning you have completed what may be the important thing you do all day in light of eternity.

Take the Peachtree challenge for ten minutes a day over these coming weeks.

I love what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “At the threshold of the day stands the Lord who made it.” Give Jesus your threshold. Do whatever it takes to find that time alone every day for you and God.

Send down those roots. Go deep.

Join this in this great adventure of prayer in the Peachtree family.

Let’s pray together the beautiful closing prayer on page 20:

Prayer:

*Whom have I in heaven but You?
And there is nothing on earth I desire besides You.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
Those who are far from You will perish;
You have cut off all who are unfaithful to You.
But as for me, the nearness of God is my good.
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
That I may tell of all Your works. (Psalm 73:25-28)*



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