

Part One: Individual Prayer

Week One

LOOKING AHEAD: BEGINNING A PRAYER JOURNEY

During this first week, we seek a time and place to pray.

We embrace surrender, awareness and trust.

Seeing ourselves as chosen for this journey.

We open ourselves to God's touch of love.

God seeks us; we are precious.

We have run away.

We ask for God's mercy.

Week One: Day One

SPACIOUSNESS: FINDING A TIME AND A PLACE TO PRAY

I must have time, space and quiet for this gestation to occur.

—Joyce Rupp, *The Star in my Heart*

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
Will enter your house

—Psalm 5:7

I love to walk into a neat, clean and ordered room. When I do, I feel my spirit expand so that peace and silence can fill me. When I tidy a room, a new spaciousness opens up, as do new possibilities. With clutter removed I see things in a new, optimistic light.

Spaciousness in our lives is what we need to nurture new life as we work with this book. This spaciousness connotes a gentle and flowing order, without rigidity. We need to open up our time, our living space and our hearts in a new way for our healing journey.

Many of us know the importance of having a space of our own to enter and to pray, to just *be*. During this special time, we need to reclaim that special space, a home for our souls, where we can go and be quiet. This is a place where we can listen. Perhaps we need only a bedroom corner and a comfortable chair. There may be a table where we have placed a candle and an icon or statue. A rarely used formal dining room fills the need for others. Other family members should know that this is our space for prayer. When we enter and light a candle, we have entered holy ground, and we are enclosed with God, fully open to Spirit.

When do we find time alone? Is it early in the morning, when we rise in darkness and open our heart to the Spirit?

Spiritual writer Gary Zukav calls this “Earth time.” We are still tied to the earth by sleep, and the raucous world has not yet entered our consciousness. This is the time of deep waking dreams and a lovely spirit connection. I know that I feel gentleness and an inner quiet when I pray early in the morning.

Do we choose to pray in an empty chapel at lunchtime? An unused room in the office building? A quiet place in a park for prayer and journaling? An apple and some cheese satisfy our hunger when we are filled with God.

We may wait until evening when all is quiet, turning our thoughts to God and to birthing this new life within us. Whatever the time or place, we are committed to the process, and we try again when we fail.

As I write these words, a soft rain falls upon a boundless earth. The gentle earth teaches us that there is a time and a place for everything. Deep in the soil are all the dormant seeds, waiting for the warmth of spring, and there is space for everyone. The earth makes room for all her creations: rabbit and birds, grasses and clovers, trees and black-nosed raccoons.

God fashioned a creation of uniqueness and beauty, and we are an important, vital part of God’s creation. Just as within the acorn is all the potential of the mighty oak, so within us is the potential of a unique and beautiful nature, a special spirit given to us alone. In the great heart of God is everything necessary for our growth. We need but claim it; open ourselves to the blessings God longs to bestow. Let us begin today in a new way.

FOR REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

- + Where can you have a secure and quiet place to pray?
- + When is the best time of day for your prayer?

+ What are your feelings as you begin this journey of prayer?

CLOSING PRAYER

Let God speak to your heart...O my beloved, abide under the shelter of the lattice for I have betrothed you to Myself, and though you are sometimes indifferent toward me, my love for you is at all times as a flame of fire. My ardor never cools. My longing for your love and affection is deep and constant.

—Frances J. Roberts, *Come Away My Beloved*

Week One: Day Two

GOD IS SEEKING AFTER US

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

—Luke 15:4–6

We have begun our healing journey by seeking a place and a time to pray. Perhaps we are realizing this at this moment: we are in our special place and the time has come for us to open our hearts to God's care. Now we look at our attitudes toward God and God's work within us. I want to assure you that work with these daily spiritual exercises is not really all about work at all! Allow me to make a comparison.

I have a guilty secret, which is that I think I weigh a good bit more than I look like I do! I guess I still look thin,

because people are always telling me that I look like I have lost weight or ask me how I stay so trim. These comments come despite the fact that my scale has been moving steadily up for several years. Therefore, after Christmas when the scales tipped up even further, and my jeans (I already went up a size) got very hard to zip, I said, “This is it. I must cut back on my eating!” If this sounds like vanity, it is. Vanity dances around in my shadow and often invades my persona. It is the vanity of insecurity, not pride.

So like folks all over the country, I hit the gym more and pushed away the butter and mayonnaise. I even gave away the Christmas fudge! This weight loss thing is a self-improvement project, and I have taken charge!

Healing the soul is nothing like this, nothing at all. Instead of taking charge, we relinquish it. We open ourselves in surrender, a very counter-cultural thing to do.

In the parable of the lost sheep, the sheep is doing nothing at all but being lost. All the initiative is left to the Shepherd who is ardently seeking his sheep. Of course, the sheep could have remained hidden and run from the shepherd’s voice. It could have stayed in the wilderness and refused to come home. But sheep are smarter than that.

As we begin our journey, know that the one we seek is already ardently seeking us. God longs to help and to heal. Harold S. Kushner tells us, “We may be so busy taking care of things that we neglect our souls.”¹ This is when we wander far away from the one who loves us. This is when God walks through the wilderness of our hearts to bring us home.

FOR REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

- + Read the passage about the lost sheep (Luke 15:4–6) in your Bible. Write down those words that speak to your heart.
- + In what ways do you feel lost?

- + Are you in touch with your hurting or “desert” feelings?
- + What within you resists surrender to God’s care?

CLOSING PRAYER

Great Heart within me and about me,
Help me to believe that I am so uniquely precious to you,
That you would go wandering in the desert looking for me,
Leaving the ninety-nine.
I guess my small heart can’t quite wrap around it,
I can’t understand my value to you.
Help me to surrender all those things I thought I knew
about myself,
Into my Shepherd’s gentle care.

Week One: Day Three

CHOSEN FOR GOD’S KINGDOM OF LOVE

You did not choose me but I chose you.

—John 15:16

It’s my God, too, my Bible, my church, my faith; it chose me. But it does not make me “chosen” in a way that would exclude others. I hope it makes me eager to recognize the good, and the holy, whenever I encounter it.

—Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*

Yesterday we looked at developing an attitude of surrender, or releasing ourselves into God’s care, the way a sheep would turn toward his shepherd. We can only begin to surrender when we feel safe, when we develop trust in God to care for our needs.

When our lives are chaotic and things are not working as we would wish, this trust is harder to develop. Developing this trust will be a part of working with this

book and looking deeply at your life, your choices. The paradox for us as Christians is that in the midst of a broken world, we find, as Father Richard Rohr says, that the universe is friendly and that no matter the external conditions—we are safe.

So even now, early in this process, I ask you to take this a step further and to embrace not only surrender and trust but an attitude of being *chosen*. Depending on where you are in your life, you might want to say, “What? Chosen for this? Could I be unchosen, please?”

This morning I smile as I remember my friend Teenie who was attending a Catholic school in the sixties. Teenie very much wanted to marry and have children, and so she wondered about the sisters who taught her. *Why had they become religious sisters?* She asked one of the nuns this question and the dear lady said, “My child, I was chosen by God.” Shaken to her core, Teenie then ran into the hall and leaned against the wall praying with all her might, “God, don’t choose me! Don’t choose me!”

Ah, but God puts the desires in our heart for what is to be our path in life. (Teenie did indeed marry and have children.) Part of this process you now begin is to get in touch with those very desires.

If your life is going smoothly at present, the knowledge of being chosen may feel, well, just *right* to you. I have often shied away from this word, because I don’t like the idea of my being chosen by God if someone else is left out. But it doesn’t mean this at all. It only means that we allow ourselves to be open to God’s voice, God’s unique call in our lives.

I had an intuitive experience of feeling chosen one afternoon, as I struggled to bring order to this book you are reading. A long session of cross-outs and unsatisfactory rewrites

had left me wondering about my vocation as writer. Then later I was able to make this journal entry...

As I sit on the porch this afternoon, waking from a nap, the sun breaks through the clouds and casts a soft almond light over everything, in a last burst before setting. I suddenly feel blessed, somehow chosen to be at this very place and see this very light. Chosen to wrestle with these specific words and write this unique book.

It occurs to me then, that this promise of being chosen is real. Jesus clearly states in John 15 that he has chosen us to be grafted to the vine that is himself. That this vine is to bring us love and health, and flower us into the very kingdom of God that we seek.

I ask you to consider that the fact that you are doing this inner work indicates your beginning embrace of being chosen. As you pray and spend time seeking God, you become more firmly grafted onto the vine that is Christ and more open to the Spirit within you.

FOR REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

- + In the chaotic and calm events of your life, do you recognize that you have been chosen?
- + How do you recognize the good and holy when you see it?
- + How does it help you become what you seek to become?
- + How do you claim God's goodness for yourself? What are you claiming today?

CLOSING PRAYER

God, make me a healthy branch
Of your ever-flourishing vine.
I want the greenness of your love,
Flowing into me. Refreshing me,

Allowing me to see beauty and goodness everywhere.
May I dare to believe that you have chosen me?
And that if I surrender my life to you,
That all will be well.
Amen.

Week One: Day Four

AWARENESS AND OPENNESS

Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.”

—Mark 10:51

O Divine Presence,
I do not enter the deeper realm
All by myself.
Always you are there with me,
As a Guide to protect and direct me,
As a Loving Companion to embrace and support me,
As a Wise one to provide both challenge and solace.
—Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home*

I am a feather on the breath of God.

—Hildegard of Bingen

In previous days we have looked at our attitudes toward the spiritual journey: the trust needed to surrender, and the knowledge of ourselves as chosen in God’s sight. As we begin to pray daily, we ask for a new awareness to come into our lives—a new seeing. We seek to see more deeply into things, and to know that the surface of things is not all there is. We pray to know how God is working in our lives,

how God is reaching out through people and events and nature to heal us and bring us home.

For the past year or so, I have been taking walks in the sugarcane field behind my house. This is a special place for me now and when I hop over the ditch and enter the turn row, I feel that I am in a different world. The sugarcane field reflects all the changes in nature as the seasons progress: the tiny green shoots in spring, the billowing of hearty green in summer, the harvest of fall. A few days ago I walked there into a wonderful flurry of yellow butterflies that filled the rows and dipped into the rainwater held by little hollows in the earth. I was aware that nature—God’s world—is intensely beautiful and filled to bursting with good things. This knowledge gives me courage as I look at visions of war and suffering on my television screen. I allow myself to live in paradox and to embrace my questions about the way God works in our world. If I allow it, the delicate, floating butterflies and the cane field that embraces them open me to the wonder of God’s providence.

Author Paula D’Arcy says it this way: “So much is hidden from me. Hidden right in front of my nose, and directly in my line of sight. But I will not see it until I am able to look from a different place and am ready to know what I have not yet considered.”²

Jesus healed hurting people so many years ago, and I believe that he still longs to heal our wounds and blindness if we but ask. Our faults are hidden from us, it is true, but so is the goodness within us. We believe we are what others have told us we are. We think that the world is the way others have *told* us it is. We don’t know that there is so much more.

FOR REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

Don’t worry about working on becoming more aware. This kind of new seeing comes slowly and gently. We don’t have

to figure it out. Jesus still heals our inner eyes, the eyes of the blind. All we need to do is surrender and ask for the gift of a new awareness: to see God shining in everything and everyone, especially now within ourselves. As our journey continues, we will receive the light in new ways and recognize the Companion who brings us home.

- + What are you feeling as you begin this process?
- + What do you hope to see within yourself?
- + Do you feel resistance to being hopeful about your own healing and restoration? Explain.
- + Do you think you are as open to and aware of the beauty and goodness about you as you? Is it easier for you to notice things and circumstances that you perceive as negative or painful? Explain.

CLOSING PRAYER

Hildegard of Bingen, Lord,
said that she was a feather on the breath of God.
Like the yellow butterfly she rose and fell gracefully with
the currents of life.
What within me resists this graceful dance?
How am I closed? Where do I lack awareness?
Help me to see again, to really see the ways that I myself
make life difficult.
Now I dare to believe that you are speaking to me, Lord.
Give me the openness to hear you!
Give me the trust that accepts and embraces all that is.
Amen.