

UNFORCED RHYTHMS

why daily devotions
aren't for all of us

Gwen Jackson

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FOREWORD



To evangelicals, the practice of “daily devotions” has become a sacrament. More than that, for many, this ritual of getting up early, reading the Bible, and praying has become the prime sacrament, even edging out the Lord’s Supper. Ask Christians for the single greatest secret of a successful Christian life, and most will answer, “morning devotions.”

In this book, Gwen Jackson tackles the highly sensitive subject of how moderns have turned daily devotions into a required practice of the devoted life. It has become almost an idol to some. Any practice can become an idol when the method is worshiped more than God. Moses set

up a pole to cure people from snakebites in the wilderness as a wonderful means of healing and grace. Yet later, Israel turned to worshiping the pole itself. The means of grace got more attention than God. This is what some Christians have done with daily devotions.

Have you felt this pressure to fit into the daily devotions mold, even though your life runs on a different rhythm? Many of us have been told the really elite Christians also maintain a *prayer list*, and they spend time *journaling* as well. Some preachers promised us that, after an hour—or two, or three—of this “time alone with God,” we would “come down from the mountain” with faces aglow from having spent time with Jesus before breakfast each day.

This is what we’ve been urged to practice: piety as a solitary practice, preferably in the morning, on a twenty-four-hour cycle. When someone turns their back on God and falls into grave sin, we warn each other, “Better keep up on your devotions, or you could fall too.” Face it, you’ve probably never heard someone say, “Better keep taking communion or you, too, could fall like that?” In today’s church, daily devotions have become the number one sacrament. This is the primary way we expect God to change us—even more so than attending church.

The author of this book does not diminish the importance of prayer or Bible reading. She deeply believes in and practices these disciplines. These practices, and more than a dozen others, have been honored among Christians for more than a thousand years. What this author does challenge, however, is the notion that prayer and reading on a twenty-four-hour cycle—the *daily* and *morning* part of daily morning devotions—should be a requirement for

all people. She urges us to make room for other rhythms of personal spiritual practice.

This must have been a tough book to write. Who wants to appear to be disassembling what has become a sacramental rite? Wouldn't the church be better if *more* people had daily devotions, not fewer? Yet Gwen does not discourage people who keep a daily regimen of prayer and Bible reading to stop. She merely offers encouragement to the many folks who live to the sound of a different life rhythm. She tells these folk that they don't have to squeeze into a rigid box of traditional, daily devotional practices. People with different rhythms can also draw closer to God.

Are your daily morning devotions flourishing? Great! The premise of this book is not dangerous to you. It won't talk you out of your morning ritual. What it will do is give you ideas to expand your practices to include other rhythms beyond daily ones. Even if you are a "very daily person," you already have some weekly rhythms: Saturdays, Sundays, hump days. And for sure you have annual rhythms like birthdays, vacations, back-to-school weeks, Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Thanksgiving. This book is likely to inspire you to add some annual or seasonal practices to your spiritual rhythm. If your daily devotions are flourishing, read this book because it will expand your means of devotion.

Have you had trouble making devotions a daily routine? Perhaps you never felt quite right fitting into the glass slipper of daily morning devotions. Do you feel guilty? Are you embarrassed? Are you afraid you might be a substandard Christian? Maybe you've tried and failed so

many times you've simply given up. For you, this book will be liberating! Here you will get to know one of the great saints of our age, an author who struggled just like you before discovering there is more than one way to draw close to God. You'll find alternative paths, based on other rhythms—unforced rhythms. You will be delighted to discover there is a size that fits you, *your* rhythm, *your* time of life, and *your* schedule. For you, this book will be absolutely liberating!

Or, are you a pastor or church leader? This book will help you develop a new vocabulary of devotion. It will prod you to stop elevating daily morning devotions as the best or even the only way to know God. It will draw you back to core practices like prayer and Bible reading instead of the package we've been putting these into. When we do, we will lead more church folks into greater devotion to God because they will have found the rhythm of life that works best for them. And that will be a great thing!

—Keith Drury

INTRODUCTION



vulnerability,
the key to connection

I can't believe I'm telling you all this," Courtney said as she sat across the table from me. We had been sitting in a coffee shop in downtown Indianapolis for over an hour. My twenty-something daughter had connected the two of us. "Mom, would you be willing to meet with a friend of mine?"

It was the first time I had met Courtney, a mid-twenties young woman who was wearing jeans, a wool sweater, and ankle-high boots on that crisp, fall day. With a soft, patterned scarf layered around her neck, she had the look of rugged cuteness. Her pixie cut was perfect for her round face, her black hair matching equally dark eyes.

I listened to her story, the current life situation that had brought the two of us together. Three-plus hours later, we exchanged a hug and set up a time to meet again in the near future. Courtney and I met consistently for the next three years until she made a move to the West Coast. Ironically, Courtney must have sensed that I was writing about her because I received a text while writing this portion of the book: "Hey Gwen! You free to chat tomorrow or Saturday sometime?"

Connecting with people one-on-one is one of my favorite things to do. I love meeting people, hearing their stories, and getting to know them through those stories. Surface talk has its place, but going deeper, to the soul and spirit of a person, allows perspectives to change and understanding to take root. This is where I like to live. I love coming alongside others, wherever they might be on the journey of life. When I'm sitting across from someone, I listen with an ear to understand. My empathy and restorative nature (thanks, *Now, Discover Your Strengths!*) kick in big time, along with my desire to encourage and support with love and understanding.

If I can't sit across from a person due to distance, the next best thing is to connect through written communication. There was a day when I would actually write a letter on paper, seal it in an envelope, place a stamp on it, and pop it in the mailbox. Now delivery is expedited via email or social media. When I'm creating a message, seeing the face of the person to whom I'm writing makes the experience personal. I share from my own life. My vulnerability tells the other person they aren't alone. It gives them hope.

In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown, a researcher on shame and vulnerability, describes vulnerability as “the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences.”² Without vulnerability, how does one relate with another? Vulnerability opens the heart for connection. It paves the way for open and meaningful relationships. Without it, how can I truly know you, and how can you truly know me? Within the pages of this book, you’ll hear my heart. These chapters must be marked by vulnerability. Without it, it wouldn’t be me writing. I can’t pretend.

On my fortieth birthday, my husband invited four couples to join us for a relaxing and meaningful evening, honoring my request for a quiet and simple celebration. Without my knowledge, he had asked each person to write words of affirmation and be prepared to read them aloud to me. On that delightful evening, surrounded by friends in a cozy living room, words of love and acceptance tumbled into my heart, words that described who I was from those who knew me well. A common thread joined the words of all eight friends: real. sincere. authentic. genuine. Vulnerability produces this in me. I can’t not be real.

I trust you’ll hear my heart as you read, yet my vulnerability carries a risk. Part of me fears writing this book because I wonder what people will think of me. Will fellow believers gasp at the idea that my spiritual rhythm does not include a daily time with God?

I fear I’ll be misunderstood.

I fear that others will think I’m judging those who have (and enjoy) daily devotions.

I fear some will remain in bondage to a ritualized way of doing things while others may take my words as a license to spend no time with God at all.

But what I fear most is you'll miss the point I hope to make: the goal of spiritual formation—Christ formed in us—is to know and love God for the sake of others.

Yet my courage and fear have met, so I am “daring greatly” by writing this book. It has taken courage to share my life, to share the things that have freed me to live in Christ through who I am. My relationship with Christ is a grace-filled journey—engaging with God through my unique life rhythm, finding my identity in him as his beloved child, and expressing his love to others through my personality, strengths, and gifts.

It has also been encouraging to find, after beginning to share these insights with others, that I am not alone. This means you're not alone either. The discovery that I'm not the only one who struggles with the expectations that have produced chronic defeat in my spiritual life has reassured me. That is what happens when we hear someone say, “Me, too.” Shoulders relax when we begin to be real. Perfectionism and concern for what other people think melt away.

As I am writing, I am thinking of the faces of many in the world who struggle with spiritual expectations, forced disciplines, and the need to measure up. Such expectations—perhaps imposed by Western church culture or locked in by traditional values—often put a person of genuine faith on a path that feels like legalism, while yearning for intimacy with Christ apart from a formula or ritual. Some of you I have met, and others I know only through a shared understanding of this spiritual struggle.

I pray the words of this book may flow like a letter to a dear friend. I trust they will begin a dialogue not only between you and me but also between yourself and others, and that that dialogue will produce conversations filled with grace.

This book describes my journey away from the burdensome expectations—sometimes self-imposed—that drained the joy from my spiritual life and left me defeated, into the grace-filled spirituality that fits the rhythm of who God created me to be. It is part spiritual memoir, part guidebook. As I relate my story, you'll find plenty of help here for your own journey too.

The early chapters of this book describe various aspects of both the bondage I felt in living under unrealistic spiritual expectations and the discoveries I made that led me to freedom. This journey was not linear for me, and the story is not told in a linear fashion. Some chapters will feel circular, as if we are dealing once again with spiritual problems already faced and overcome. Those chapters simply deal with a different aspect or nuance of my struggle, examining the same problem from a fresh angle. There was no single aha moment that led to my freedom. It came after years of one small victory at a time, sometimes followed by lapses back into spiritual defeat.

As we begin this conversation, let me tell you what this book isn't about and then what it is about. It's not about throwing prayer and Bible reading out the window; it is about discovering a new perspective on living in relationship with God and others.

It's not about opposing spiritual practices. It is about understanding and appreciating the heart of those practices.

It's not about bashing those who have daily quiet times. If anything, I admire those who practice that discipline. Their consistency is something I strived to achieve for years. I celebrate their discipline! It is about doing away with self-imposed burdens, false expectations, chronic defeat, and perfectionism—the very things that keep us from truly living and loving in the name of Christ.

Part 1 of this book exposes four barriers to intimacy with God, opening the pathway to freedom. This book is about living an abundant life, as Jesus promised.

Part 2 brings us to the discoveries I made that led to my freedom to relate to God in a new way. Chapter 5 will demonstrate that the main thing in our spiritual lives is to “just live” for God, free from burdensome rituals and false guilt. And chapter 6 reveals that we can trade in our burdens—guilt, defeat, and shame—for the “burden” Jesus offers: love. Chapter 7 recounts my discovery of the concept of “life rhythms,” the three different beats by which we may find ourselves navigating life—and our relationship with the Father.

Part 3 explores life rhythm in more detail. Chapters 8 through 11 describe the three rhythms and how to live by them. You'll find yourself leaning into one of them more than the others. I've illustrated each category with scenes borrowed from those I know intimately—my mom, my husband, and myself. And, you'll hear from real people who have found freedom to embrace their unique life rhythm as it relates to knowing God and doing life.

Part 4 focuses on the significance of spiritual formation. In chapter 12 you'll learn why we do what we do to be formed spiritually. In the final chapter, we'll talk about

spiritual practices, though this is not an exhaustive treatment. Much has already been written on this subject. We will clarify why these practices exist—to assist us in spiritual formation. You'll come away with an increased desire to benefit from these time-honored practices.

This book is about understanding the rhythm of your life and allowing it to shape and form your intimacy with Christ.

It's about maturity for the sake of others.

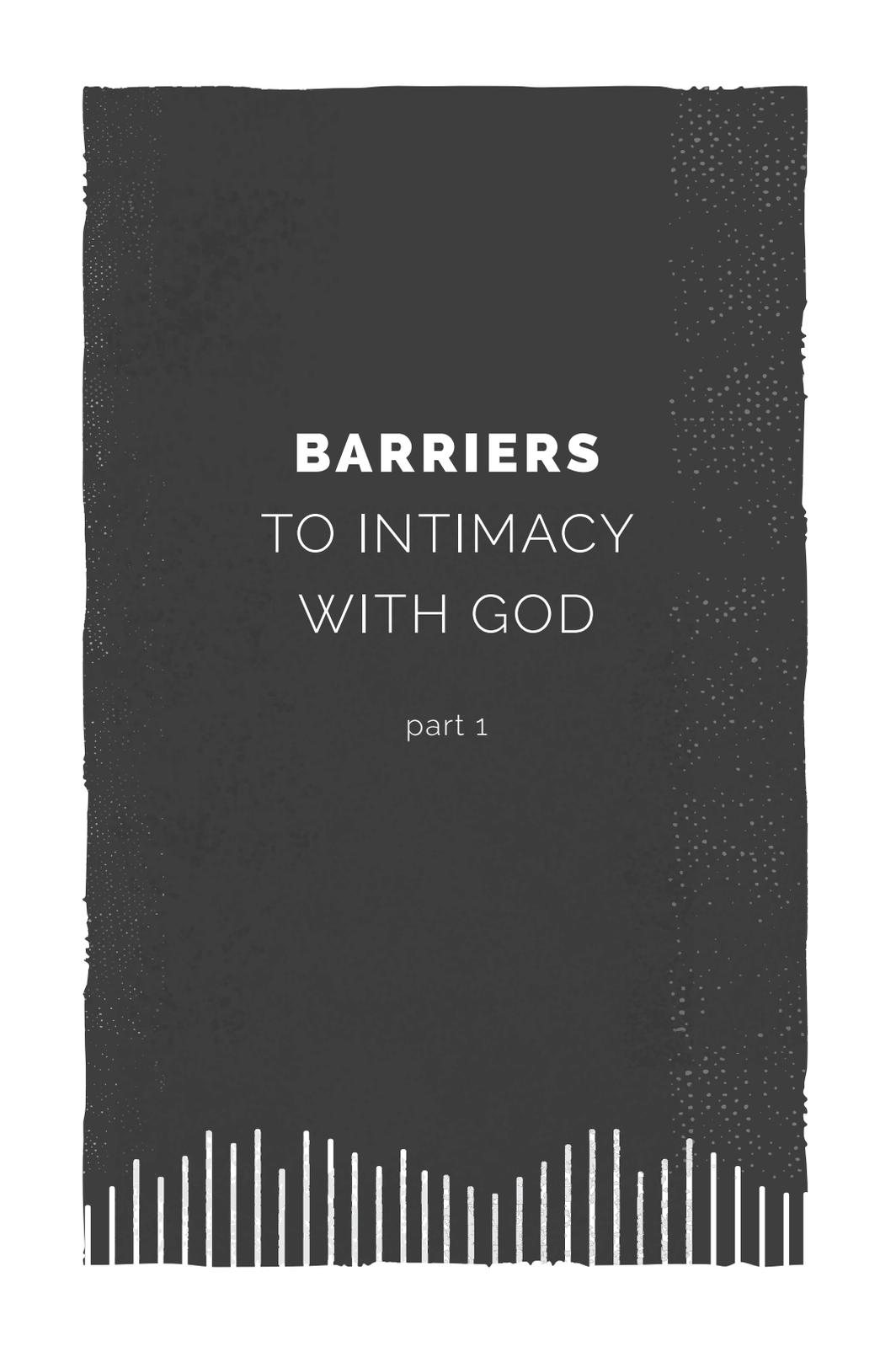
It's about celebrating each other's differences.

It's about uniqueness.

It's about freedom.

It's about God's love and grace.

Pull up a chair. Let's have a cup of coffee or your favorite tea. It's good to meet you!



BARRIERS
TO INTIMACY
WITH GOD

part 1

1

OUGHT AND SHOULD



the barrier of self-imposed burdens

We might be functioning out of an inordinate sense of “ought and should,” burdened by unrealistic expectations about what it means to be a good Christian.

—Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*

I distinctly remember one winter afternoon in my favorite coffee shop in the city of Budapest. Even though it was a ten-minute walk plus a twenty-five-minute tram ride from the flat where we were living at the time, I found it worth the travel time. Good coffee, friendly baristas, and a variety of seating options drew me back repeatedly. Besides that, coffee shops inspire me. It could be the aroma of coffee that floats in the air or the ambient noise that drowns out some of my mental hum, but either way, coffee shops provide inspiration that can carry me for several hours at a time.

That day, I had settled into a comfy chair in the corner. With my computer in my lap, I sorted through email while

sipping a vanilla latte. My eyes landed on a thread of messages from my prayer team, a select group of women who came alongside me in prayer throughout our time in Europe. I often asked how I could pray for them as well, and Erica, whom I had known for over twenty years, had responded with a concern about her spiritual growth. I first met Erica when she was dating Jon, who did a summer internship with my husband, Dennis, at a local church. After Jon's college graduation, Dennis had the privilege of performing Jon and Erica's wedding ceremony. That summer internship grew into a lifelong friendship.

In her email, Erica asked for prayer and guidance in dealing with her feelings of guilt when she didn't "daily find time for the Lord." She said she did best when she was part of a group in which there was accountability to do a lesson or study at home, but even then she felt like she was only "going through the motions." She also said she enjoyed connecting with God through music and reflective prayer but added, "I don't make time for this daily." Erica's frustration was not new. She wrote: "I have been a Christian for twenty-eight years, and I know what I 'should' be doing, but I struggle with making it real sometimes, and feeling connected with God during devotional time."

Erica desired to have intimacy with God but struggled to make her time with God meaningful on a daily basis. That was something I could relate to. In fact, the same tension had been brewing in me for years.

GROWING UP IN THE CHURCH

My parents took me to church from the time I was born. My mom's parents, Papa and Nana to me, helped care for babies in the church nursery, and it was there where I first began to learn of God. I can still visualize the preschool Sunday school class where I played on a wooden rocking boat that, when turned upside down, became steps to toddle up and over. Simple songs, often accompanied by hand motions, taught of God's love and care for me. Stories from the Bible were told with pictures and songs. The story I remember best was that of Zacchaeus. While making climbing motions, we sang of the "wee little man" who "climbed up in a sycamore tree" because "the Lord he wanted to see."

Luke tells us Zacchaeus was a short man and a chief among those in the Roman tax-collecting business (see Luke 19:1–10). His profession made him an affluent man, but it also carried a poor reputation. The general public considered tax collectors a disreputable bunch because of their dishonesty in overcharging people on their taxes. Crowds of people had gathered in Zacchaeus' hometown of Jericho, knowing that Jesus was coming through on his way to Jerusalem. Word about Jesus was out, and people were amazed at his miracles and authority.

Curiosity drew Zacchaeus to the crowded streets. Desperately trying to get a glimpse of Jesus, Zacchaeus decided to run farther down the road. He spied a sycamore-fig tree, climbed it, and waited for Jesus to pass by. Zacchaeus watched with eagerness as he parted the deep green leaves of the tree. Who was this man, Jesus? Maybe

Zacchaeus had gotten wind of Jesus' story of a tax collector who prayed with a humble heart, compared with an arrogant Pharisee (see Luke 18:9–14). Or perhaps Zacchaeus had heard of Jesus' conversation with a wealthy man who couldn't give up his riches in order to gain eternal life (vv. 18–23). No doubt perplexed and thrilled at the same time, Zacchaeus kept watching.

When Zacchaeus saw Jesus in the crowd, his eagerness turned to bewilderment. Jesus stopped right in front of the low-hanging limbs of the sycamore. The crowd stopped. Zacchaeus didn't know if he should duck behind the leaves or continue to gaze upon this man. Looking up into the branches, Jesus saw Zacchaeus peeking through. By now Zacchaeus' heart was pounding. Then he heard his name: "Zacchaeus." How did Jesus know his name? Jesus called out over the crowd's voices, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home" (Luke 19:5–7).

As a child, I know I didn't think through all the implications of the story, but what a wonder it would have been for Zacchaeus to hear his own name called out by Jesus. Beyond that, Jesus was inviting himself to Zacchaeus' home! Flabbergasted, Zacchaeus scrambled down the tree and took Jesus home with him. That was the end of the Jesus parade. The crowd dispersed, just as astonished as Zacchaeus was, though some likely followed to see if Jesus was true to his words. Their astonishment was undoubtedly mixed with ridicule and displeasure at the thought that Jesus had invited himself to the home of a despised tax collector. Even so, that day transformed Zacchaeus' life.

Jesus called Zacchaeus by name, initiated a relationship with him, and then dined with him in the comfort and familiarity of Zacchaeus' own home. After meeting with Jesus face-to-face, Zacchaeus decided to make his wrongs right. He promised to give back four times the amount he had cheated people on their taxes, and he committed to giving half his wealth to the poor. It's an astounding story of redemption.

At the age of ten, I had my own life-changing experience. I wasn't sitting in a tree but in the same church where I'd learned of Zacchaeus. It was during a weeklong series of nightly services given by a visiting evangelist, not an unusual event for evangelical churches in the 1960s and '70s. Sunday school classes were canceled to accommodate an added Sunday service, and I sat with my fellow fifth graders on folding chairs in the overflow section, behind the main sanctuary. I don't remember who the preacher was or what he said that day, but I do remember how I felt when, at the end of his message, he invited anyone who desired to invite Jesus into his or her heart to come and kneel at the altar at the front of the church.

While the congregation sang "Amazing Grace," my heart began to pound and tears welled up in my eyes until they spilled over. The girl next to me looked curiously at me, seemingly unaffected by the message. But like Zacchaeus, desperate to see Jesus, I longed to have him in my life. And like Zacchaeus, I heard my name. Jesus was calling me, inviting me to let him into my heart's home.

Yet if it had been unlikely that Jesus would notice Zacchaeus sitting in that sycamore-fig tree, it was even more unlikely that I would have the courage to walk down

the center aisle of the church to pray at the altar. As far as I could see, no one was moving, and I certainly wasn't bold enough to be the first. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to see my dad. He had been sitting several rows behind me and noticed my tears. "Do you want to go forward?" he asked.

I nodded my head "yes," and, hand in hand, we made our way to the altar. Together we kneeled. Others eventually knelt on either side of us, responding in faith to the message they had heard.

The sensitivity of my dad that day will forever hold a special place in my heart: my earthly father led me to my heavenly Father. Dad knelt with me as I prayed a prayer confessing my sins. Tears ran down both our faces as I thanked God for sending his Son, Jesus, to give his life for my sin so that I might have eternal life. With joy, I accepted Jesus' invitation to make himself at home in my heart. I remember immediately feeling clean inside. It's the only way I can explain it. Something had happened in me, and I knew it was because of Jesus. The next morning, I got on the school bus with a desire to tell others what had happened. Jesus lived in me, and I wanted to live for him.

Though I had lots of learning and growing to do, my commitment to live for Jesus was unwavering from that point on. The spiritual highlight of my teen years came the summer before my senior year of high school, when I attended Explo '72, a Campus Crusade for Christ event held in Dallas. Along with a crowd of over 80,000—mostly high school and college students—I sat in the packed Cotton Bowl stadium under the hot Texas sun. The atmosphere in the stadium was contagious and

AT THE
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EXPERIENCE.

exhilarating. Our young hearts wanted to grasp more of Jesus.

During one of the evening rallies, Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade, gave a message on being filled with the Holy Spirit. That night I committed myself to follow Jesus more fully by surrendering my whole life to him. It was a sanctifying experience. I set myself apart for God, giving all that I knew of myself at that time to all that I knew of him. That became an ongoing growth point for me, because as I discover more things about myself—through life experience, through trials, and relationships—I am reminded that I am always in need of further transformation. The more I discover about God, whom I can never fully comprehend this side of heaven (see Rom. 11:33; 1 Cor. 13:10–13), the more I am in awe of his mercy, grace, and love for me.

A SPIRITUAL ANGST

As my walk with Jesus began to mature, I was eager to be everything God wanted me to be. To me, that meant following “the rules” for living the Christian life. Overall, the church conveyed there were essential practices that led to a believer’s growth. New Christian follow-up material usually contained four key elements: read the Bible daily, pray daily, witness by sharing your faith, and attend church regularly. Over time, these four practices became the only things that mattered—rules to be followed. If I was consistent in each one, I was doing all the right things to become a mature believer.

Before long, a seed of guilt sprouted deep within my being. This guilt grew particularly when I didn't spend time with God on a daily basis. I had been told that having personal daily devotions was essential to my spiritual growth, so for years I tried to fit into that box the Christian world had shaped. This package came with concrete numbers. I heard them time and time again from Christian speakers at conferences, in Sunday morning messages, and in books: a half hour with God every day was good—though even fifteen minutes was better than nothing—but an hour of Bible reading and prayer was really good. Go beyond an hour and, well, that made you a saint.

My spiritual life had come to be defined by who I ought to be and what I should be doing, not by my initial love for Christ.

These numbers were usually paired with specific times of the day. If this "quiet time" was spent in the morning, before the day began, you were a super saint. Bedtime was another viable option. Since I was a night owl rather than a morning person, neither sounded appealing to me. As these expectations grew, they began to choke out the tender shoot of my relationship with Christ. Defeat and discouragement cropped up to replace the victory and encouragement I first had in my life with Christ. My spiritual life had come to be defined by who I ought to be and what I should be doing, not by my initial love for Christ.

Looking back on those days, it's no wonder I had internalized these false expectations. The Christian publishing industry mass produces books, journals, and daily devotionals that unintentionally propagate these artificial standards for what a mature devotional life looks like. By whatever name we call it—spiritual discipline, quiet time, time alone with God, daily devotions—this practice is believed to be an essential component of Christian growth. Yet while I desired to be in God's presence, the struggle to set aside time each day created angst. I was torn between my desire for more of God and my anxiety at trying to follow "the rules" for Christian growth.

Sadly, the only daily routine in my spiritual life was the burden I felt to have devotional time and the condemnation I experienced when I didn't. The finger of accusation pointed all day. Guilty! I felt it in a thousand ways. If the day went haywire, well, it was because I hadn't had my devotions. When I did get my devotions in for the day, I was frustrated that I didn't have more time. God became a check box on my spiritual to-do list. When I checked the box, I felt legalistic, and when I didn't, I felt guilty. I didn't want it to be this way, but I didn't know what to do about it. I was living the reality that my friend, Erica, described as "just going through the motions."

FREEDOM

Sitting in that coffee shop in Budapest, I felt all of those emotions flooding back. With great empathy, I responded to Erica's email and, perhaps for the first time,

put into words the discoveries that had released me from the weight of those terrible words *ought* and *should* in my spiritual walk. After decades of spiritual angst over this matter, I could write to her from a place of freedom, a freedom that empowered me to connect with God and others naturally and authentically. This freedom came to me bit by bit, through a series of life experiences, a new understanding of Scripture, and an acceptance of my uniqueness, which gradually released me from the pressure to follow a formula or a set of rules.

The self-imposed or others-imposed expectations no longer hovered over me. Instead, I found the grace to engage with God through the uniqueness of who I am without striving to be someone I'm not. And sometimes that grace finds me sitting in a coffee shop somewhere in the world, encouraging a friend via email while I sip my vanilla latte. I'd like to think that you and I are sitting across from each other, engaging in conversation as we journey through this book. There's no doubt in my mind that you're going to find your heart lighter, your spirit freer, and your soul less weary by the time we reach the end.



PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What's your story of salvation? Take time to write it out or share it with a friend.
2. Did you relate with Erica's struggle? If so, in what way?
3. In what ways are you thankful for your spiritual upbringing?