

# PLANNING YOUR TIME WITH GOD

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*Planning Your Time With God*

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# Planning your time with God.

*Why should you plan your time with God? Will it squash your spontaneity?*

*And what about if that part of life has been kind of “dead” for a while? Can it really help?*

*Or what if...what if you've never had “time with God” at all? What kinds of things should someone expect out of that?*

**If any of those thoughts on the previous page hit home with you, this booklet may help.** It is meant to be a simple guide for anyone who is just beginning to think about developing their personal time with the Lord (which Christians often refer to as “devotions”). Or maybe you’re just looking for some fresh ideas for this part of your spiritual life; this booklet might provide some help. It is specifically for Christians, since I’m assuming in these pages that you’re interested in this subject because you have already begun to know God (by trusting in Jesus Christ as your savior). If you’re not, read on, but understand that there is some groundwork that would need to be laid before any of this would really make sense to you.

## GETTING STARTED

People sometimes think it is unspiritual to actively plan out their methods for pursuing spiritual growth. But the truth is that without spending some time thinking about how you’ll meet with God (other than trying to think about it when the alarm’s going off and you’re warm in bed), you might never find yourself growing. So planning doesn’t have to quench spontaneous spirituality, it just needs to be submitted to the Lord, and he can use it to actually increase the depth of your time with him.

The three things you need to have for your devotional time are a time (“when am I going to do this?”), a place (“where will it happen?”) and a plan (“how should it go?”).<sup>1</sup>

## ESTABLISHING YOUR TIME

First, let’s look at the idea of how to plan your time. Quite simply, you need to decide *when* you are going to spend time privately with the Lord. Otherwise, isn’t your life so pressing and filled with things you have to (and want to) do that it can be crowded out? If we don’t make a decision about when we’ll carve out time to be with God, we might find that it will never happen.

Two factors to consider:

1. When do you actually have time to do it? (Or, when can you realistically *make* time?)
2. When are you best able to read and actually think?

Factor number 1 means that you have to decide either when you naturally have time (for instance, if you have an hour every day after class or work when it is easy for you to get alone where you live).

Or, if you have no easy time already built in to your schedule (which is most likely the case), when can you realistically *create* time? When can you carve time out of your schedule, by cutting out other things?

This may be the key to increasing your time with God.

It might help to make a list of how you spend a typical weekday and weekend. Add up how much "expendable time" you have (time left over after you do things you can't avoid like work or school). Then note how you usually use it. How much time goes to entertainment like TV, movies or the internet? How much time goes to social life? Other hobbies or interests? The point is to honestly make ourselves look at our days (see Psalm 90:12) and how much time God has given us to do whatever we want with. Then we'll know what we're actually responsible to be stewards over.

If you actually write out a list and add it all up, you'll end up with a number, visible on the page: this is how many hours you have to work with for creating time to spend in personal devotions.

If your schedule is full of mostly essential things, it may be that sleep is the best thing for you to cut time out of. I can testify that I grow with the Lord more by regularly being with him for an hour in the morning rather than regularly sleeping for one more hour.

Factor number 2 ("When are you best able to read and actually think?") reminds us that we need to consider how we personally operate. The obvious choices here are: "morning person" or "night person." If you can't help but fall asleep any time after 10 pm, don't decide to make your time with the Lord start at 9:45 every night when you finish your day. If, however, you get charged up when it's dark out, maybe you should plan your times before bed.

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A word of caution here: One common mistake people fall into is to put themselves into a box when it comes to thinking about time. Just because you have trouble getting up in the morning doesn't mean you were born "not a morning person" and therefore will never be able to read or pray in the morning. You will most likely surprise yourself with what you are able to do if you discipline yourself and establish different habits.

Lastly, realize that you may need to plan ahead to make sure that the time you pick actually happens. If you're planning to sit with the Lord from 9 to 10 pm, it may mean that you move earlier things around to make sure the time stays open. If you want to get up and read from 6 to 7 in the morning, it will most likely mean that you can't stay up as late as you did when you were just rolling out of bed to get to class.

*Has God really not left me with enough time to know Him, or do I need to reprioritize?*

Sometimes we might find that it takes even more discipline to make ourselves go to bed early enough the night before than it does actually to get out of bed.

Another thing to consider when thinking about the "time" part of all this is how long the time will be. If you have no habit established, a half hour is probably a good place to start, with almost equal parts given to prayer and reading. You should think about working up towards at least an hour, though, to give yourself plenty of time to both read and mull over God's word, as well as talking to and listening to the Lord. You will probably find that you will grow to want even longer when it's possible, to really let God's word work on you, and to really have time to be with him in prayer.

The fact is, lack of time is such a common enemy we face. But we should think like this: "What does it mean for me to 'redeem' the time God has given me to live?" (Ephesians 5:15-16)

Has God really left us with not enough time to know him, or is he calling us to re-prioritize our lives and make our time serve his purposes?

## FINDING YOUR PLACE

There really are just a couple important elements in finding the right place for your personal time with the Lord, which you probably already have a good grasp on. First, if at all possible, it is ideal to have a place where you can be alone. I'm sure there are some people who think no place is more sacred than the local Starbucks or Barnes & Noble, but, let's be honest, we think better when we're alone, for several reasons. First, we need to be able to control our environment so we aren't at the mercy of other people when we're trying to be with God. Second, as I read one time in a book on prayer, it is not that God is different when we're alone, it's that we are. Nothing helps you focus on God like not having to focus on what other people might be thinking about you.

This is especially true because our times with the Lord do need to include prayer. And what if you just need to get out of your chair and get on your knees to work something out with your Lord? Suffice it to say that your neighborhood barista might be weirded out.

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It is also essential to be able to ensure quiet. Our lives are so noisy. It takes discipline to create space for us to be able to listen to the Lord as we read and pray. Along that line, the place you choose should offer freedom from distraction. This too requires discipline, because nothing will ruin things like itchy fingers who have easy access to cell-phone Facebook apps, etc. We simply must learn to disconnect...so that we can connect.

What about spending time with the Lord while you're driving? Of course, we should pray always, and there's certainly no better way to use the time in the car, but should it be your only time? No guilt here...but would you date someone or cultivate a marriage by only talking to them on the way to work? The road just doesn't seem to lend itself to the kind of focus, freedom, and heart-searching that being with the Lord usually requires.

Of course, the truth may be that at times you might find it literally impossible to find a place alone or quiet. The Lord will give you

grace to know him in whatever circumstances he places you in. But if we can be alone in a quiet place, we'll typically find the most fruitful times there. And sometimes we just need to get creative. You may have heard the story of Susanna Wesley, who, with more than a dozen children, used to sit in her chair and pull her apron up over her head to be alone to pray in the middle of a room crowded with kids. I have a friend who had her father clear a space in the basement to create a little haven in a crowded house. So you might need to get a little creative. If you live on campus, one option might be student lounges, which are often empty early in the morning.

## HAVING A PLAN

It's a common issue: You've got your place, your coffee, your Bible, you got up on time—you did it...Now what? Good plans for both Bible

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reading and prayer can help you avoid wasting time figuring out what to read or pray. They can keep your times from becoming repetitive. And they can help you keep moving when any number of factors make it hard to continue.

As far as Bible reading goes, you need a plan that helps you daily:

- *Receive strength for your faith*
  - *Know God better*
  - *Enjoy your relationship with him more*
  - *Grow in understanding all of his word*
- *Hear his voice, obey him, and trust him throughout the day*

There are lots of downloadable, printable plans online that you can easily put in your Bible and start using.<sup>2</sup> Most of them will get you through the whole Bible in a year. You can choose a plan that takes you through in regular order, or others that take you on different paths through the word. This way you'll digest God's word in its totality, over the course of the whole plan. (If you've never read the whole Bible, this would be a great way to start.)

Don't worry about finishing in a year or get pressured about "keeping" up with any plan.<sup>3</sup> Better to read and get it, then to hurry from chapter to chapter. Better to stop and pray over a verse when the Holy Spirit starts working in you than to move on just to keep up with the plan. (The plan is not God.)

And, while you're in the middle of it all, if you find that a plan isn't working, throw it out and find a new one! Better to be honest and seek God about how he wants to be sought than to soldier on with something that isn't helping you and bearing fruit.

Whatever Bible reading plan you use, when you sit down to read, and open your Bible, a good habit to develop is to stop and pray before you start reading. I love to take a breath and say something to the Lord like, "I'm here Father. Speak to me. Help me understand what I'm about to read. Help me to hear what I need to today." I once read about someone who likes to pray these four verses before he begins to read: Psalms 119:36, 119:18, 86:11b, and 90:14.

Praying before we read God's word reminds us that we can't do any of this without the Spirit's help. So we should be praying: that we'll be able to understand it; that we'll be able to concentrate; that God will speak to our hearts while we read; that we'll see what he's saying, not just what we're looking for; that we'll love it and get excited about it.

*Praying before we read reminds us that we can't do any of this without the Spirit's help.*

## **PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR BIBLE READING**

If you struggle to stay awake, concentrate, or comprehend what you read (all common issues), here are some practical ways you might help yourself:

1. **Involve other senses in your reading.** Whether you start to fall asleep as soon as you open the Bible, or you just can't read a sentence or two before you're thinking about something else, getting your other senses involved can be a great help. Here's a few ways to do it:
  - a. Read out loud.
  - b. Listen to audio scriptures.
  - c. Hand write a copy of the scripture you're reading. This can be especially helpful in slowing down your thinking and helping you actually see what you're reading.
  - d. Use maps and charts, especially for Old Testament Law or Narrative.

- e. Print out copy of the passage and use it to circle things, draw arrows, write notes, etc...
2. **Journal.** For many people journaling is one of the most effective ways to enrich their time in the word. Here's a few ways you could use your journal:
- a. With each daily reading, you could write out certain things.
- a study of the passage (Setting, Time, Place, Events, People, Teachings)
  - things you learn about God from the passage.  
For example: What he's like, how he works, what he's done in history...
  - lessons the characters learned
  - things you could apply to your life today
  - ways the passage helps you: trust God more, resist temptation, know or enjoy God more
  - questions you have about the passage
  - answers to questions, when you find them
- b. Keep running records of certain themes: (for example...)
- how you see God taking care of Israel
  - commandments Jesus gives to His followers
  - times God miraculously came through
  - encounters people had with God
  - how the big story is built as each part of the Bible contributes to it
3. **Memorize.** Here's a few thoughts to get you started:
1. Memorize verses that help you.
- on an index card or scrap of paper, write a verse from your daily reading and carry it around. Read it through the day when you have a second.
  - keep a list of helpful verses and work through them one at a time till you've got them all.
  - think through your struggles, find applicable verses, and memorize them to fight with.
2. Memorize larger sections of scripture
- you can memorize more than you think
  - it is a great way to gain deeper understanding
  - print out whole sections, break them down into manageable chunks, and give yourself plenty of time.

In short, get yourself involved in your reading. It is interesting to think about why God decided that we would have his revelation written in a book. But that's what he did. What this means for us is that it requires that we learn to be good readers as part of our spiritual growth. And good reading is always active reading. Read with a pencil in your hand. Interact with God as you read his word. Write questions that pop up in your mind. Stop and make a chart of a difficult verse to see if you can figure out what's being said. Copy a verse that jumps out at you, and then stop and pray over it. Underline, circle, etc. And the best part is it's all just between you and God, so you can be yourself.

### **Some help for common issues in reading the Scriptures:**

One thing that plagues many people is the struggle to keep your interest even in passages of scripture that seem more obscure or hard to understand. Here's some thoughts on this:

- *Don't expect the same kind of "meaning" from every part of scripture.* Different parts of the Bible speak differently to us. There's history, poetry, wisdom literature, letters, and prophecy, and they all represent different ways God communicates his truth to us. Then there's the differences between the Testaments. Getting to know your Bible front to back is the best help in all of this.
- *Whenever you're reading, look first for what you learn about God in the passage, and then look for what you learn about your life.* The Bible is written to teach us about God and tell us the good news of his salvation. We'll learn about ourselves in relation to him and his message.
- *See all of scripture as telling the story of God's activity in creation,* and use your reading to see what he's done and where your life fits into that picture.
- *Look for Jesus in all of scripture,* and consider how Old Testament passages point to him in prophecy, patterns, history leading up to him, etc...
- *See your reading time as a chance to spend time with God and hear from him.*

- *Disconnect yourself from over-stimulating media.* The less time you spend consuming modern media, with all its over-stimulating images and sounds, the more your mind will be able to handle sitting and looking at the pages of a book (which will never offer special effects to keep your interest). This is a life-style choice: how do you want your mind to work? Let's allow God to give us focused, stilled minds when it comes to sitting with His word.

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR PRAYER

First, I should say right away that I do not consider myself an authority on prayer. I am constantly seeking growth in this area. In fact, I regularly pray for growth in prayer. With that clear, here are a few things I've collected which may help someone who realizes they need to begin having regular times of private prayer.

To start with, we should be clear that every Christian needs a prayer life that is:

- Regular, not just during crisis
- Private, not only public or “during the day”
- Talking and listening, not just repeating lists
- Comprehensive, not narrow
- Shaped by scripture, not just our own thoughts

**1. Write out a prayer list that includes everything you should be normally praying for.** One suggestion: In writing this list, start with your own soul and Christian walk, and then work outward from yourself in expanding “circles”. For example, your list might include the following topics, with specifics under each one:

1. Soul (walk with God, victory over sin, growth)
2. Immediate Family (parents, brothers and sisters)
3. Close Saved Friends (their walks with God, strength, more faith, those who need healing)
4. Unsaved friends and family (their salvation)
5. Your community (Neighbors, your city, schools near you)
6. Your school/work (the gospel to be spoken and believed, sin to be suppressed, learning to happen)
7. Your Country (peace, boldness for Christians, government to submit to God's laws)
8. Missions and Missionaries
9. Specific Nations around the world<sup>4</sup>
10. Special request that come up daily (have a way to keep track of them...)

**2. Pick certain days of the week to concentrate on praying for certain things.** For example, you might make a list that looks like this:

- Monday: Family
- Tuesday: Friends
- Wednesday: Unsaved People I Know
- Thursday: Missions/Missionaries
- Friday: Future Plans
- Saturday: My own walk
- Sunday: Church

**3. If a prayer list doesn't work for you, you might try prayer cards instead.** I read about this and started doing it and it has helped me immensely. At the top of an index card write the name of the person you're praying for. Then write a verse to pray for them under their name (pray about what verse to pick!). Under that you write a few pressing needs. You end up with one card each for all the people you want to pray for. I also have "group" cards (one for our church, one for the Young Adults group, one for the church elders...etc.). Then, as you pray, you just see one card at a time at the top of the stack. You pray for that person, and then move on to the next card.

**4. Leave time for the Holy Spirit to move or speak to you as you pray.** Let yourself sit in silence, speak to the Lord (since he's near) and allow him to speak to you. Open your Bible again and linger over a verse you read, or a Psalm, as part of your listening to God.

**5. Take scriptures and turn them into your personal prayers.** Many Psalms are ready made for this. You might also pray thoughtfully through the prayers in scripture like those of Paul (Eph 1:15-23, 3:14-21) or Daniel (Daniel 9:1-19) Commandments and exhortations are great to pray over too, that God would give you strength to obey them or act them out.

**6. Read the prayers of great men of God. Not to copy them, but for instruction.** Books like *The Valley Of Vision* can help with this.

## A Sample Quiet Time Schedule:

Here's one example of how you might divide up your time:

1. Talk to the Lord. Ask him to help you wake up spiritually and understand what you read.
2. Work on memorizing a portion of scripture
3. Read the scripture
4. Write about what you've read, think it over.
5. Write down a verse you liked from the passage and take it with you.
6. Pray over passage of scripture
7. Pray through prayer list

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Notes:

1. I have to admit I heard this "Time, Place, Plan" breakdown somewhere. But I just can't remember where, or who used it. It may be that it's just really common. If you find out who said it first, drop me an email.
2. There are several at <http://youngadults.ccp Philly.org/resources>
3. Personally, I have never completed a trip through the scriptures in under two years. For whatever it's worth.
4. For help with this see: [www.global-prayer-digest.org](http://www.global-prayer-digest.org); or the book *Operation World*.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are a lot of great resources on these topics, but here's just a few for you to consider if you want some further help.

**K.P. Yohannon's book *Learning to Pray*** is both short and helpful. A little longer, but very practical, is **Paul Miller's book *A Praying Life***.

**Robert West's tiny book *How to Study the Bible*** will take you almost no time to read, yet he somehow packs in loads of help for learning how to read scripture by yourself. (You should be able to get it for under \$2. Search ISBN # 159789706X)

If you want to start a conversation directly, speak to the leader of the campus group you're a part of or the person who gave you this booklet, or get in touch with us at [talk@truthoncampus.com](mailto:talk@truthoncampus.com).

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## **Who we are:**

Truth On Campus seeks to equip students on college and university campuses, to cultivate Christian thinking and living in the academic environment, and to spread the gospel. Working with existing campus groups, we aim to help you with free resources discussing the issues Christian students face, as well as addressing the “big questions” that all people ponder. Truth On Campus is based out of Calvary Chapel of Philadelphia, online at [www.ccphilly.org](http://www.ccphilly.org).

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