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## First Word

SOMETIMES MY son's brain seems to be in outer space." The dad bit his lip and stared across the empty park. "I can't get through to him."

I nodded my understanding, and the words slipped out as if by themselves: "The less I tried to fix my daughter and the more I prayed for her, the better she got. My wife had cancer, but she prayed like a madwoman and got healed."

"That's cool for you." He sighed and shook his head. "But I don't know the right words. And when I do pray, God seems beyond my reach."

He had read books on prayer and tried several times to pray regularly. But each time he floundered like a fish on the bottom of a boat, until he prayed only at mealtimes and at church. He wasn't happy about it, but he didn't expect much change for his son or for himself.

His world, my world, your world churns with needs. Sometimes they overwhelm. Do you ever feel as if your prayers hit the ceiling and bounce back down? Maybe you settle for praying enough to meet a minimum quota—whatever that is. And if you're "religious" enough, you may feel a tinge of guilt that you don't pray enough or the right way.

Let's forget about "have to," "ought to," and "should." I think most of us would love to connect more with God in the conversation of faith we call prayer. Yet most of us cannot (or would not) hide away in a monastery to learn how to pray better. That's okay, because God doesn't hang out only in monasteries. He lives and links up with us in the middle of our busy lives.

This book can help improve your connection with the one who created you and loves you. We'll look at people who have gone before us, what the Bible says, and practical ways to grow closer to God in prayer. Each day speaks to an essential facet of a dynamic prayer life and ends with a prayer starter for that particular area of prayer. An appendix at the end of the book has "growth gauges" and suggested activities corresponding to each day that can help you get an idea of where you are in each of the topics and what you could do to improve.

As you read this book, you may identify with the guy in the park. Like me, he's come to see that improving his connection with God is not a pipe dream—it's a reality within our reach. It takes time and commitment. It takes new habits. And it's worth it, even if the road is bumpy. Every day is God's gift of a new beginning.

Praying people usually find that the rewards surpass their expectations. Mother Teresa said, "Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of Himself."<sup>1</sup> How big can our hearts grow?

Let's find out.

DAY 1

## Hunger for God

I SAID YES to pastoring a church that in twenty years had gone through fifteen pastors. And of those twenty years, the last two were without a pastor at all. Just about every bad thing that could happen in a church had happened there. But I was going to turn it all around.

I had committed to staying for at least five years. After four and a half years, I seriously evaluated myself and the church. We had some successes and had become a nice, evangelical congregation with lots of activities—but I felt as if we were on a treadmill. Though a few of the members were loyal and committed, others resisted change, such as my expectation to commit time and allegiance to God and to ministry.

No matter what we did, it seemed that our meetings, outreaches, and even picnics were uninspiring and repetitious. No one was happy—not me, not the church members, not even visitors.

I didn't seem able to lead them. At least, they weren't following.

I grew discouraged. I concluded that the only reason I attended the church was because I was the pastor.

I persuaded the members to agree to make changes—like pray more, follow my leadership and the Holy Spirit’s leading, and step up to do more ministry. But most people found those changes too unfamiliar or too demanding. Some families moved away. Most left for other churches. More than 90 percent of the congregation walked out the door.

I felt like a worn-out rag.

I wrestled with the temptation to quit, but I sensed God had called me to stay with the church. So I decided to stay no matter what. I didn’t know where else to go anyway. But my determination staggered under the burden of discouragement. I needed hope.

I could see that my academic degrees and ministry experience would not get me through this. And God didn’t show any sign of giving me an easy way out. I took an inventory of my heart. I admitted I was tired of hearing what I ought to do. Tired of feeling that I was never good enough. Tired of letting church be a substitute for God.

I knew my biggest problem was with me and God, and I doubted he was the problem. I began to pray as I never had before: “Lord, take me past failure and success, past performance and being good. I want you. I want your Spirit to breathe in me. Catch me up in something greater than my own life. I’m hungry for you, and I don’t care what other people think. Everything else in my life fades compared to you.”

The more I prayed, the more I wanted only God and what he intended for the church. My hope increased. My hunger for God increased. And to my surprise, new people came into the church.

Those who left lamented that the church didn’t function the way it used to. One said it was going to hell. But the new people sensed the hope I had found. They too began to hunger for God. That hunger moved us toward a whole new experience of God—and a whole new church.

## **Getting Hungry**

Hunger for God is that deep desire to know and experience more of God. The prophet Isaiah felt it when he cried out, “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you” (Isa. 26:9).

Hunger for God often starts when the doctor says “cancer,” when a husband dies, or when the boss delivers a termination notice. Times when no one can help but God.

Hunger for God often emerges when our daily grind leaves us weary, when life plateaus and unfulfilled dreams slip through the holes of an empty heart. We finally say, “God, I don’t like change, but staying the same is worse. I’m hungry for you. Give me all of you. Do what you want to do in my life.”

My hunger grew out of the tired desperation of life on a winding-down treadmill. A friend of mine endured a divorce and realized he’d never get out of this world alive, so he’d better wake up. We all have our own stories, our own struggles and blessings. Whoever we are, we can say, “Lord, I want more of you!” From that follows everything else in our prayer lives.

## **Hunger Gets Intense**

Hunger for God is a lot like hunger for food: we can wish for a snack or starve for a feast. I found that the hungrier I was, the more of God’s presence I felt. It was up to me how close I felt to God and how much his presence lifted my attitude. I came to agree with A. W. Tozer, who says that God “waits to be wanted.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite riches and power, King David had a huge hunger for God: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps. 63:1). Can you feel that verse? “Earnestly,” “thirsts,” “longs.” David’s hunger for

God is so strong that he feels it in his physical body. Then he says, “Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you” (v. 3).

Do you ever crave that “better than life” experience of God’s love? The sons of Korah did: “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Ps. 84:2). These guys are so hungry for God, they’re ready to faint! They’re emotional, even physical about it.

Psalms 143:6 gives us a concrete picture of hunger for God: “I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.” This is ground where the grass is dead, ground so dry it cracks.

I know how that ground feels. I need the Holy Spirit’s abundance in my life. Just *wanting* that abundance has changed my prayer life. Hunger drives me—drives us—to seek God more. And he waits for us to want him.

## **Determine to Be Hungry**

Despite all that, sometimes I don’t feel like praying. I’ve got lots of reasons: I’m too busy, I’m tired, I prayed enough yesterday. That’s when I say, “Lord, increase my hunger for you. I want more of you!”

People have hungered for God all through history, besides in the Bible. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish monk, was just a little guy—but he had an enormous hunger for God. He tried to show what that hunger was like by drawing a diagram that depicted the top of Mount Carmel as spiritual union with God. All sorts of other desires lined up on either side, but a single-minded, passionate focus on God pierced straight through to the top. John ultimately desired God himself, not his gifts or blessings. Instead of seeking the rewards the world offered, or even the rewards God offered, he emptied himself of desires and gave himself



to God. On top of the diagram, he wrote of those very rewards, “I have them all without desire.”<sup>2</sup> John experienced the truth of what Jesus taught: “Seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33). When we put God first, everything else follows.

Hunger for God is the heart of prayer. Without hunger for God, nothing can improve our prayer lives. The truth is, unless we’re hungry, we probably won’t pray much. When we want God more than anything else, we’ll continually talk with him.

### **We Leak!**

Hunger for God is a continual craving. Just as eating a big dinner still leaves us hungry the next day, a meaningful experience of God eventually gives way to spiritual dryness. We can also think of our spiritual lives as a bucket. God’s Spirit fills us the way water fills a bucket. Sin, stress, and the busyness of life poke holes in the bucket. Giving our time and energy to care for others, and apparently just being human, poke holes. And we leak. Developing a hungry—or thirsty—mind-set keeps us getting refilled. When we recognize that all the things that claim to satisfy won’t, habitual desire for God becomes more and more natural.

I was looking for something that would keep me hungry and wanting to be refilled.

### **A Sense of Eternity**

Feeling God’s nearness was great. Yet I was looking for a whole new way of thinking that would keep me pointed toward God, despite how I felt or whether my prayers got answered. I found what I was looking for spread all over the Bible: a sense of eternity. A sense of eternity means I realize how short my

life is, and how everything I do on earth can be done with an awareness of heaven. It helps me remember what's truly important. The results can be eternal. Here are a few verses that express that:

- Psalm 39:4—“Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life.”
- Psalm 90:12—“Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”
- Psalm 103:15–17—“As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower in the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him.”
- Ecclesiastes 7:2—“It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.”
- James 4:14—“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”

If we internalize the message of these verses, nothing—absolutely nothing—in this world will hold the importance to us that it did before. A sense of eternity frees us from the burden of demands and desires in this world. Freedom *from* the world is freedom *for* God.

### **The Best Thing in Life**

I have come to believe that the best thing we can have in life is not family, not love, not even receiving Jesus. The best thing in life is a hunger for God, because we will always get more of him. This hunger leads nonbelievers to faith in Jesus and believers to greater experiences of Jesus. Hunger for God

always leads us closer to him. Whether in this life or eternity, what could be better?

*Prayer* **STARTER**

*Lord, put in my heart a continual hunger for you. Above all the things you give me, I want more of you. . . .*