

Prayer: Forty Days of Practice

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A simple yet profound guide to facilitate the instinctively human desire to pray.

We pray because we are human, not because we are religious. Something in our nature points beyond itself; something in us searches for and desires personal connection with God. Although communicating with our Creator through prayer is innate, the effective practice of it often feels just beyond our reach.

This unique book guides you to pray in deeper and more authentic ways. The short prayers and thought-provoking imagery, interspersed with contemplative reflections and suggested practices, will stir, inform, and encourage you. The simplicity of the prayers and the aesthetic appeal of the images will inspire people in every facet of life, including those with no real religious background at all.

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Scott Erickson is a touring painter, performance artist, and creative storyteller who mixes autobiography, biblical narrative, and aesthetics to create art that speaks to our deepest experiences. Scott lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and three children.

Before You Begin

Creators of all kinds (particularly authors) tend to refer to our work as "content," that is, something contained. I've come to think that's a bit of a misnomer. I'd like to suggest that Scott and I make resources and tools that stir, inform, and inspire human lives but that it is what is happening in those human lives that is most rightly understood as content. In that spirit, this book is rooted in the content of two human lives (Scott's and mine) but should not be, as an artifact, most accurately considered content.

This book is a piece of art.

This book is an act of love.

This book is a redemptive tool.

This book is a resource.

This book is designed to stir, inform, and inspire you.

This book is not "content."

The ongoing conversation between you and God is content.

I remember kneeling next to my mother's bed, trying to balance a small porcelain statue of Jesus on the lumpy bedspread. When I thought I had set it firmly upright, I folded my hands and closed my eyes to pray, only to be interrupted by the light thump of Jesus toppling over again. I don't know how many times I repeated the process, but as best as I

remember. I never got around to the actual business of praying because I couldn't set up correctly.

As I have with so much else in my process of faith, I had allowed mechanics to trump essence. I thought I needed all the right elements properly executed in order to pray. Instead of seeing those elements as helpful (which they most certainly can be), I treated them as essential (which they most certainly are not). I was like a man who had seen water delivered only in clear glasses and would not, regardless of how deep his thirst, drink from another container. I think you will agree that the method of delivery, be it glass or plastic or the cupped shape of a human hand, can be very helpful and might even be beautiful, but it is the act of drinking that matters first.

I have come to believe that allowing the mechanics of prayer to trump essence presents a grave danger. Having grown distracted or disillusioned by mechanics, I might too easily abandon something I essentially need. You see, I believe I pray because I am human rather than because I am religious. An essential aspect of my nature points me beyond my nature and, I further believe, beyond what I know of nature altogether. Some primal thing urges me to search for and connect with the Divine. Tradition can and does provide language, shape, and space for that primal urge to pray, but the instinct to connect with God does not emanate from that tradition. Having allowed the mechanics of tradition to take a back seat to the essential nature of prayer, I can more readily receive the language and imagery of tradition as a great gift.

Our desire in this book is to extend a gift to you from our own practices and traditions by providing language and imagery you may find helpful for your practice of prayer. Herein, you will find us doing that in four ways:

- ~ Guided prayers
- ~ Contemplative imagery
- ~ Meditations
- ~ Suggested practices

Guided Prayers

Since 1998, as a writer of both prose and song, I have worked to provide language for the process of faith and life. In a sense, I am offering back a gift given to me. I have often needed the words of others to help me see what was in my soul when my own language failed me.

From Thomas Merton to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or from my neighbor to immediate family, the gift of others' words has been like borrowing a cup from someone else so that I could pour my life into it...or pour it out.

May the language herein be that same kind of gift to you. Consider focusing on one guided prayer (and its corresponding image) each day and see what you find in you.

Contemplative Imagery

Scott and I wanted to create something that invites you to do far more than simply read what is written and agree or disagree. The design of this book is an invitation to stop, listen, hear, see, recognize, and contemplate your life, the lives of those you love, and the presence of God in, through, and around all of it. That kind of contemplation takes what Scott likes to call an "excavation of the soul"-the kind of digging good art invites us to do.

In Scott's words:

We've all read a book that has pictures in it. Most likely the illustrations creatively visualized the words being communicated in the story. If it was a children's book, the images did all the heavy lifting in keeping your attention. That's how most of us experience imagery.

But I don't think that's what these images are for. I think imagery is another language entirely. Neuroscientist Dr. Andrew Newberg agrees, writing in his book *How God Changes Your Brain*, "Drawing is a form of communication that is neurologically distinct from writing and speech.... In essence, words and pictures are two integrated elements of language, and most words...have an 'image' quality associated with them. If the right hemisphere is injured, words and pictures lose their meaning." He continues, "Words are not enough to describe a spiritual experience."^[1]

Prayer is a conversation about everything. Words and images are vital tools that can help us grow in this endless and ongoing conversation, but we must understand that the words and images we use are not the content itself. They are excavation tools that help dig toward and into the real content: the ongoing, ever-present conversation between us and the Divine.

Scott has often been asked what his paintings mean. And while questions of intrinsic meaning can lead to interesting conversations, perhaps a better question about visual art is, What does the piece draw out of you? Henri Nouwen's remarkable book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is a retelling of his interactions with Rembrandt's iconic work by that same name. Rather than centering the book on what can be found in the painting, Nouwen shares the ways Rembrandt's work dug into and unearthed pieces of his soul, helping him see things in himself in need of repair, as well as things healed and in the process of restoration.

May the imagery herein be that same kind of gift to you.

Meditations

The transitions between the book's sections are highlighted by meditations on the essence or nature of prayer. By calling them meditations instead of essays or even reflections, we are inviting you to engage with them a touch differently. Rather than asking yourself, "What do I think about this? or Is this correct?", pay attention to your responses, emotions, and thoughts. What is happening in you as you read through the meditations? In other words, we're not asking you to come to a conclusion or make a judgment about the content or to agree with the philosophical or theological angle taken. These meditations, much like the brief prayers and images, are intended to stir what is in you rather than to get information into you.

Suggested Practices

Each of the six meditations is paired with a way to practice the discipline of prayer. Our desire is to be a help to you in your long-term process rather than to provide a singular moment of inspiration. Including these suggested practices is a way for us to offer something you can return to and use on the road ahead—the kind of book you keep with you in your bag or on your nightstand.

We suggest allowing yourself some time to practice unfamiliar types of prayer. Not everything works for everyone, but we've found that it can take a fair bit of work and honest trial to truly discover what works for you. For both Scott and me, engaging the almost endless variety of methods and shapes of prayer has been a freeing and soul-shaping gift. May the practices suggested herein (journaling, exercise, fasting, meditation, lament, and intercession) be that same kind of gift to you.

May I...Make an Assumption?

In putting this book together, Scott and I assume the loving and redemptive activity of the Divine in, around, and through your life. In that light, framing our prayers with "May I..." is a way to enter into the extant movement of God rather than feel we are responsible for chasing God down somewhere we aren't yet living.

The "May I..." language of these prayers borrows from the jussive mood in the Genesis creation account, wherein God speaks all things into being by saying "Let there be..." The jussive mood suggests that Reality should be the way God desires it, not simply because God says so, but because being shaped and ordered according to the Divine Will is the fullest expression of Reality. Praying "May I..." is a way to enter into the work God is already

doing in, around, and through us, according to God's Will and design.

We join Mary, the mother of Jesus, who prayed, "May Your word be fulfilled in me," or "May it be with me as You say," or "Let it be with me according to Your word," or "May everything You have said about me come true." Praying "May I..." means leaning into what God is doing and how the Divine Will has set things in and around us in motion.

Teach Me to Number My Days

While there is a great deal of value in prayer guides offering a more structured and chronologically ordered approach to the practice, we're offering something rather different here. Consider the layout and format of this book an invitation to let your soul, rather than a page number or calendar day, tell you where to stay or move and when. Certainly, you are welcome to start with prayer 1 and work straight through to prayer 40 in linear fashion (the book's layout allows for that as well). But should you find yourself resonating with a particular prayer, stay there. And if you land on a prayer that just doesn't connect with or stir anything in you, feel free to move on.

Because it isn't the format of this book that matters most.

Nor is it the words in this book.

Nor its imagery.

What's happening in you is what matters.

What's happening in you is real content.

[1] Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine, 2009), 99-100.

Other Books

Practicing Pilgrimage, *Practicing Pilgrimage: On Being and Becoming God's Pilgrim People* explores both the theological, cultural, and spiritual roots of Christian pilgrimage, and is a "how-to" book on doing pilgrimage in our suburban backyards, city streets, rural roads,

churches, retreat centers, and our everyday life. Brett Webb-Mitchell takes the ancient practice of Christian pilgrimage and applies it to our contemporary lives.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ . Sinai: The Abundant Emptiness. London: Ziggurat, 2013. Chatwin, Bruce. The Songlines. 1st American ed. New York: Viking, 1987. Coelho, Paulo. The Pilgrimage: A Contemporary Quest for Ancient Wisdom . Translated by Alan Clarke."