

The 40-Day Prayer Challenge

Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Luke 11:1

The disciples didn't say, "Lord, teach us to *lead*." They didn't say, "Lord, teach us to *preach*." They didn't say "Lord, teach us to *disciple*." All of those things are good things. But this disciple says, "Lord, teach us to pray." When you change the way you pray, it changes the way you lead, the way you disciple, the way you do everything!

A few years ago, I was invited to the Whitehouse for the Easter Prayer breakfast. I live in DC so I drive by 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue all the time, but it's not often you get invited inside! I was excited about the event, and the breakfast did not disappoint. I think I figured out where our tax dollars go! So, I go through security. I weave my way to the East Room where the breakfast is being held. The Marine Corps band is playing. And right before the breakfast begins, a 76-year-old African-American pastor prays. I'll be honest. I was expecting a perfunctory pre-meal prayer—*God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food*. Truth be told, I believe in short prayers before meals. I think it's good stewardship to eat food while it's hot. But that isn't the prayer he prayed.

This pastor prayed like he had just walked out of the throne room of God. He prayed with authority and familiarity. In fact, the intimacy with which he prayed made me want to know the Heavenly Father the way he knew the Heavenly Father. When he finally said, "Amen," I turned to the two pastors who happened be right next to me, Andy Stanley and Louie Giglio, and I said, "I feel like I've never prayed before!" Not compared to that prayer!

I wonder if that's how this disciple felt when he heard Jesus pray? He was born and bred Jewish, so he had prayed his entire life. But

not like that. Not with that kind of intimacy, not with that kind of authority!

"Lord, teach us to pray!"

I think that's why you signed up for the 40 Day Prayer Challenge! You want to pray with more authority, more intimacy. For the record, I've never met anybody that felt like they had reached their prayer potential. *Yeah, I'm batting .1000*. No, you aren't. And I know why you aren't. It's because you aren't omniscient. Sometimes you ask for the wrong thing! But if you approach prayer with a teachable spirit—*Lord, teach us to pray*—it's game on! Your prayer life is about to go to the next level.

Let me share four practical tips as you prepare for this challenge.

First, **pray about what to pray about**.

I hope that takes some of the pressure off. The goal is NOT getting what we want in forty days flat. Prayer is not about outlining our agenda to God. It's about getting into God's presence, getting into God's Word and letting God outline His agenda for us!

The 40-Day Prayer challenge is about circling something in prayer for forty days, but it might take a few days or a few weeks to figure out what God wants you to circle! That's ok.

In the *Draw the Circle*, the book we'll be reading together, I share a story on day forty about the little girl who was praying before bed one night and her grandfather overheard her praying. She said, "Dear Lord, A,B,C,D,E,F,G. H,I,J,K,L,M,N,O,P. Q,R,S. T,U,V. W,X,Y. and Z. Amen." When she finished praying, her grandfather walked in and said, "Sweetie, why are you praying the alphabet?" She said, "I wasn't sure what to say, so I decided to let God put the letters together however He saw fit."

That's pretty good theology for a little girl.

The key to prayer is not getting the right combination of the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. Prayer is not abracadabra! God hears our hearts more than He hears our words. And He knows what we need before we do!

Don't feel bad if you don't know what to circle at first. Pray about what to pray about. But while you're praying about what to pray about, **enjoy God's presence!** Prayer isn't just talking to God. It's also listening to God. And I think you know which one is more important. Prayer is a two-way conversation.

Second, **don't do this alone.**

Jesus said, "If two of you agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." There is a supernatural synergy that happens when we pray with each other, when we pray for each other!

It's been so fun to hear stories of the way churches and businesses and small groups and families have leveraged the 40-Day Prayer Challenge. But my recent favorite might be this one. Last year, right before the NBA playoffs, the chaplain for the Golden State Warriors decided to start the 40-Day Challenge on the first day of the playoffs. He gave books to the players. He circled their home court before every game. I don't think they lost a game on their home court on the way to winning the NBA championship! Now, am I saying that's why they won? No! But I'm not saying it's not.

Don't do take this challenge by yourself. Challenge someone else to take it with you.

Third, **keep a prayer journal.**

II Corinthians 10:5 says, "Take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ." We think that's taking sinful thoughts captive. And that's half the battle, no doubt. By the way, the best way to break a sin habit is by establishing a prayer habit. But as you pray,

God will give you promptings. It's one of the seven languages that I outline in *Whisper: How to Hear the Voice of God*.

As you get into God's word, He'll quicken His promises. They will jump off the page and into your spirit. That's what you need to write down. That's what you need to circle.

It might be a person. Write their name in your prayer journal. It might be a situation at work that is frustrating. Pray into it. And see what God does. It may be a promise or a dream that you've been believing God for. It might be physical or emotional or relational healing. Whatever it is—write it down in your prayer journal. Then start circling that person or problem or promise.

Why is it so important to write down what you're circling in prayer? So that when God answers that prayer, you give credit where credit is due! A prayer journal is a paper trail. That's how we connect the dots between our prayers and God's answers.

Prayer is the difference between letting things happen and making things happen. Walter Wink said, "History belongs to the intercessors!" A prayer journal is history before it happens! The way you make history is by hitting your knees! When you pray like it depends on God, God has a way of showing up and showing off His grace, His goodness, His power! Prayer is the difference between you fighting for God and God fighting for you.

Fourth, **pray bold prayers.**

Bold prayers honor God and God honors bold prayers!

Hebrews 4:16 is this amazing invitation: "Let us then approach the throne of grace." How? With confidence! Not self-confidence. No, holy confidence! Confidence in a God who hears and answers prayer! "Approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Mercy is not getting what you deserve.

Grace is getting what you don't deserve.

The key to both is approaching the throne of grace with confidence. That's what prayer is! Not because of who we are. Because of who He is.

We have a little saying at NCC: **don't let what's wrong with you keep you from worshipping what's right with God.** I would say the same thing about prayer. We don't pray according to our righteousness. We pray according to His faithfulness. We pray according to His goodness. We pray according to His ability, and He's able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine.

Here's what I know for sure: **God won't answer 100% of the prayer that we don't pray.** The greatest tragedy in life are the prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked. Jesus told us to ask and seek and knock. Those are present imperative verbs! Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. And I might add, keep circling!

Too often we pray ASAP prayers—as soon as possible. We need to pray ALAT prayers—as long as it takes.

I'm going to say it again, for good measure. This isn't about getting what you want in forty days flat. This is about showing up. This is about establishing a daily prayer habit. This is about hitting your knees day in and day out.

Let me close with this.

The book of Acts says that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost happened “suddenly.” But it was preceded by ten days of prayer! Daniel breakthrough took twenty-one days. And Jesus prayed and fasted for forty days! Suddenly is almost always preceded by long obedience in the same direction. You cannot plan Pentecost, but if you pray for ten days, Pentecost is bound to happen.

Rodney “Gypsy” Smith was born on the outskirts of London in 1860. He received no formal education, yet he lectured at Harvard. He grew up in a gypsy tent, but he was invited by two sitting presidents to the White House. Gypsy crossed the Atlantic Ocean forty-five times, preaching the gospel to millions of people. He never preached without someone surrendering their life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Gypsy was powerfully used by God, but it wasn't because of his preaching. It was because of his praying! Preaching may move the hearts of men, but praying moves the heart and hand of God.

One day, a delegation of revival seekers sought an audience. They wanted to know how they could make a difference with their lives the way he had with his. His secret was simple. He said, “Go home. Lock yourself in your room. Kneel down in the middle of the floor, and with a piece of chalk draw a circle around yourself. There, on your knees, pray fervently and brokenly that God would start a revival in that circle.”

That's how revival starts—in a prayer circle! And if we pray like it depends on God and work like it depends on us, revival is inevitable!

His kingdom is going to come.
His will is going to be done.
On earth, as it is, in heaven.