



Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer

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Most Christians want to experience spiritual transformation. But many are frustrated by the limited progress of our spiritual self-improvement efforts. We find our praying burdened by a sense of obligation and failure.

But prayer is not merely something we do; prayer is what God does in us. Prayer is not just communication with God; it is communion with God. As we open ourselves to him, God does the spiritual work of transformation in us.

Spiritual director David Benner invites us to discover openness to God as the essence of prayer, spirituality and the Christian life. Prayer is far more than saying words to God; all of life can be prayer when offered to God in faith and with openness. Using the four movements of lectio divina, Benner explores prayer as attending, pondering, responding and being. Along the way he opens us to a world of possibilities for communion with God: praying with our senses, with imagination, with music and creativity, in contemplation, in service and much more.

Learn how prayer can be a way of living your life. Move beyond words to become not merely someone who prays, but someone whose entire life is prayer in union with God.

Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer Details

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katie says

I love David Benner's perspective on things spiritual. While many of the prayer concepts in this book are not new to me, it is a good reminder that prayer is mostly just our intentional consent to the work of God in us. I appreciate that Benner avoids using gender pronouns for God, and while some might find his tone vague and psychospiritual, his ideas resonate with me.

zachtaylor says

One of the best books on prayer. It is very inspirational but also extremely practical. His premise that prayer is opening ourselves up to God and something He does in us is very strong and supported throughout the book. Highly recommend.

PD says

Staff Reading.

I have read a few of his books before and this book is consistent with his tone, tenor, and vein of topics. There was a lot to affirm and be stretched in.

The things I would challenge are more to do with way he articulated and expressed things, which has more to do with our differences in Christian tradition.

If you decide to read this, you will benefit. But I also suggest you read Ed Clowney's booklet *Christian Meditation* and Paul Miller's *A Praying Life* as companion reads.

Glen Grunau says

David Benner's opening statement "If we are honest, most of us have to admit that prayer is often more of an obligation than something arising spontaneously from desire" accurately reflects my own conservative religious upbringing – which was preoccupied with "doing" to the exclusion of "being". For so many years, my journey in prayer was bound by the formalities and formulas like ACTS (adoration-confession-thanksgiving-supplication) and praying from a "grocery list" of names of people and causes. Being fond of structure and routine, this form of prayer appealed to me in many respects . . . but whenever my resolve failed, I never once questioned the form of my prayer, instead assuming that the fault rested with my own lack of discipline and willpower, leading me to simply resume my practice, but primarily from the sense of duty and obligation that Benner speaks to above.

Such beautiful freedom is offered when Benner reminds us that "rigidly hanging onto spiritual practices that no longer bring us life can also block our openness to God". Yet Benner suggests that the real problem for

many of us is much deeper than our particular prayer activities: “. . . the core of the misunderstanding lies in thinking of prayer as something that we do. Understood more correctly, prayer is what God does in us. Our part has much more to do with consent than initiative”.

When I was introduced to contemplative prayer about five years ago, for the first time in many years I caught a glimpse that prayer could be so much more than I could ever have imagined. I now belong to a contemplative dispersed community (Soulstream) which is founded on a number of values that reflect this important idea that prayer is God's initiative and our consent. The first Soulstream value is: “God constantly takes the initiative in love, expressed most profoundly in Christ”. The second is: “We live with a receptive orientation to life rather than achievement”. Applied to prayer, these values have been transformational!

In reflecting back on some of the historical difficulties in my prayer, it seems to me that I felt that I somehow had to raise myself up to a level conducive to prayer. The “adoration” in the ACTS formula that I was taught, seemed to serve the purpose of pumping myself up to feel things about God that I did not honestly feel. Benner wisely recognizes that “Rather than trying to fix things up before turning to God, genuine prayer is turning to God in the midst of the mess that is the reality of our inner world. It is turning to God in the midst of our confusion and doubt, our anger, our hopes, our fears, our fantasies, our pain, our coping, our defences, our struggles, our sin, and our brokenness”.

By suggesting that prayer is the normal, natural language of our soul, Benner offers us permission to discover our own unique prayer dialect. He offers several possibilities: “Perhaps it is silence . . . words . . . more active than reflective or verbally expressive . . . or perhaps it is more creative (and) what bursts from within you when you are your true self before God is a short story, a dance, a wonderful culinary creation . . .” I have been learning that words are not my primary prayer form. Why should they be? I have always in life been much more of a listener than a talker. Should it be any surprise that that this would also be true in my relationship with God? I resonate strongly with Benner's reference to the reminder from Thomas Keating of something long taught by Christian mystics: "silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation."

Yet Benner also offers a warning that if we only stick with our natural dialect we will limit ourselves in our growth, which requires that we “open more and more dimensions of our being to God - learning to commune and converse with God in ways that move us beyond those that come most naturally”.

When prayer is defined as attentive openness to God, practices that we never would have considered as prayer become prayer. In a recent Soulstream retreat, we were given the opportunity to experience an encounter with God in a movie. This was offered as a prayer experience. Watching movies contemplatively has turned out to represent a natural prayer language of my own soul! What a gift this has been to me, especially considering how I was prohibited throughout my childhood from watching movies for religious reasons!

Benner offers one of the most comprehensive overviews of prayer that I have encountered in one book, with a unique emphasis on contemplative prayer. Such a broad definition of what can constitute prayer truly gives new meaning to Paul's admonition to “pray without ceasing” (and I used to think that meant praying with words – how oppressive would that be?!). Benner organizes his book into 4 broad categories of prayer and suggests that the various prayer forms that he describes can be either (or a combination of) attending, pondering, responding or being.

What I love about this book is Benner's generous invitation to move slowly and to be gentle with ourselves as we open ourselves up to new and unfamiliar forms of prayer. He encourages us to “not worry about being a purist. Remember, the point is being with the Master, not mastering a practice.” He also invites us to “pray as we can, not as we should” and to be realistic about what is possible given our unique circumstances . . . and to remember that “prayer is easily ruined when we make it a project – part of a spiritual self-

improvement plan. Rather than pushing yourself forward by resolve, allow God to lead you by desire. The most typical evidence of grace at work within us is not awareness of duty but awareness of desire”.

Over and over again, Benner emphasizes intention and desire over technique. This is important given my tendency when learning anything new to give undue attention to my own efforts, often in measuring and evaluating my performance. Benner quotes Michael Casey in warning the reader that this can easily become a hazard in our prayer: "Prayer cannot be measured on a scale of success or failure because it is God's work – and God always succeeds". Benner goes on to say that “the only thing we should seek in prayer is God. When we focus on how we are doing or what we are getting out of prayer, we have taken our eyes off God and put them back on our self”. He also offers the guidance that “chief among the thoughts that we release as we seek to simply be with God in stillness and inner silence are evaluative wonderings about our prayer experience”. He reminds us of what Anthony of the Desert teaches: "Perfect prayer is not to know that you are praying."

I conclude with a quote from Benner that for me sums up the potential value of this book for all Christians committed to growing in their prayer experience: “Contemplative prayer is not so much a type of prayer as something that should be a component of all prayer. It is the silence and space for stillness before God that supports genuine presence and openness to God . . . Sadly, it is this contemplative dimension that is most lacking from prayer. Communal prayer seldom leaves sufficient space for stillness before God in silence. Even liturgical prayer often leaves inadequate space for silence, and non-liturgical worship experiences are, of course, usually infamously devoid of silence. Intentional times of personal prayer are often rushed and reduced to the basics of petitions, intercession and possibly an expression or two of gratitude. All this is certainly worthy of being called prayer. But lacking the contemplative dimension, it is not holistic prayer and it will not be transformational”.

Shane says

Benner really opened my eyes with regard to the true nature of prayer as openness to God. This books is very deep yet extremely practical. Read it!

Jordan Tomeš says

A great book about prayer. It introduced me to the concept of Lectio Divina, but it also helped me with my personal prayer life, pointing to different types and ways of prayer. I would recommend it to Christians, who are open to seeking new ways of seeking God.

Chuck says

I was looking for some additional information about Lectio Divina. While I love Jones' clear and succinct description, I wanted more. Benner offered more. Not just more volume but more insight and breadth. He couched the four elements of Lectio in new terms and filled them with new content and insight.

While I'm a novice a prayer and thus incapable of being critical, there were some elements of Benner's descriptions that left me wondering. I just wasn't sure if I could do what he asked.

However, I certainly recommend this for anyone wanting to be challenged to think in new and different ways about praying.

Peter Payne says

For those who desire communion, not just conversation with God

As long as we are stuck thinking that prayer is letting God hear a bit of our mind, we will neither experience nor know the God we seek. This message unlocks the door, opening the soul to encounter what has until now seemed so elusive.

Dave says

One of the best books on prayer I've read!

Cathy says

When I told an elder of my church that I had run out of words to pray for my dad beginning his fourth year with "incurable cancer," she recommended this book. It uses some big words for some simple, beautiful concepts, so I am not sure I would have stuck with it without the recommendation. So much of the book I already do. I wouldn't have called it prayer, but worship, or just enjoying God. But that's just semantics. I worship when I play the piano or when I sing or when I walk in nature or see His glories in the sky. I talk to Him about what I read in His Word because He inspired it. His hope and His presence and the application of bringing it into my life are all nourishment to me. I talk to Him about my own internal ponderings and wonderings, too, because He knows my thoughts anyway and has the best vantage point for walking me through them - or loving me through them as the case may be. My favorite part of the book has been the description of prayer as floating on a river, not swimming in it, but trusting it to take us where we need to go. I do that, when I open my prayer by reading scripture and then talking about it with Him. And I need to trust God more with my life circumstances. It's a good reminder. My favorite quote from the book is "And remember what Jesus said about the nature of this relationship. He said that we were His friends, not His servants. (John 15:15)... Friendship is not something we do. It is something that we might celebrate, feel gratitude for, honor and make space for, but it can never be reduced to obligations or behavior. Nor should prayer be diminished in these ways."

My problem with the book is in what the author says about the Holy Spirit in a brief section. The author calls Him female. But in John 16:5-14, Jesus refers repeatedly to the Holy Spirit with male pronouns. Obviously, Jesus would know better than we do, and He was not reluctant to tell the truth, even unpopular truth. I would not let this one section of the book dissuade someone from reading the rest of it. There is a lot in this book that might help deepen a relationship with God.

Quin Marlow says

One of my favorite books I have read on prayer. David Benner is an excellent author who is able to

communicate deep truths very clearly and powerfully. His understanding of God as love and how we relate to God in honesty and trust with all of our lives has been revolutionary for me. Each point receives multiple practical ways to work out in the reader's life. I leave this book challenged and excited to continue growing in openness to God.

Blake Chenoweth says

"Prayer is not something that we do, but something that God does in us." This book is one of the best books on prayer and lectio divina that I have ever read. It is all about being open in your life to God and His presence. When we place our self open to God and hearing from Him we are living a life of prayer. This is a transformational thing for us when pondering prayer and the need of it in our lives. When we allow God to fill us, and are open to His life-giving message we will be transformed and experience true growth.

This is a book I would recommend to anyone who is interested in going deeper in their prayer life and journey with Christ. As I was reading though I discovered that there could easily have been two books in one. He spends time talking about Lectio Divina and could make that an entire book and then the communion with God and life as prayer as another book. This does fit together as they are both essential to our Christian life, but I could've had him expand on both of these thoughts even more. Overall a wonderful read.

Tom LA says

This wonderful book is about the power of prayer. Author is David Benner, he is a professor of psychology and a spiritual director.

This book is so full of wisdom and real, personal examples (as opposed to many writings about spirituality, that can sometimes be extremely airy and vague). I am deeply impressed and I will recommend it to anyone.

Elise says

I so completely resonated with this book and found it a timely breath of free, pure air. What joy to discover such a rich understanding of prayer as opening yourself to communion with God. I much appreciated the practical suggestions the book offered and the deep application of Lectio Divina to all of life. Highly recommend.

Rev. Linda says

A text for a Fall 2016 Brite Course, "Spiritual Life and Leadership" - one of the best so far that I have read for this course, and have recommended for my church's book club. From the publisher: Most Christians want to experience spiritual transformation. But many are frustrated by the limited progress of our spiritual self-improvement efforts. We find our praying burdened by a sense of obligation and failure. But prayer is not merely something we do; prayer is what God does in us. Prayer is not just communication with God; it is communion with God. As we open ourselves to him, God does the spiritual work of transformation in us.

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