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PrayerNotes[™]
from Abbey Press

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50-25006-8

Squeezing Prayer Into a Busy Life

by Jim Auer

You've probably been disappointed more than once by letters that go like this: "Sorry I haven't written, but things have been awfully busy. Weather kind of cold lately, but every-

body is fine. Hope you are fine too. Well, better get this in the mail. Will write more as soon as I get a chance. Love..." And you've probably waited for a letter that seemed to take forever in coming.

Your prayer life may seem similar to such letters: short and mundane, with long gaps in between. You're disappointed in it and you assume that God is, too.

Sometimes people postpone writing a letter because they wait for a huge block of time when they can compose a long, newsy letter that is satisfying to both sender and receiver. You might be postponing prayer (or settling for occasional, very routine prayers) for the same reason.

But with prayer, just as with letter writing, that time never seems to come. You don't feel that you invent reasons for not praying, but too often the day ends with little or no prayer. Everything else has filled all the available time. This PrayerNote may help you deal with that situation.

Enriching your prayer life

- ◆ **Make certain that "time management" is the real problem.** Apparent difficulty with finding time for prayer can be a mask for one or more—sometimes deeper—blocks to prayer:
 - ◆ a feeling that prayer would be phony, perhaps because of guilt, resentment, or some other unresolved issue between you and God;
 - ◆ simply not knowing quite how to pray beyond a

few memorized and perhaps mechanical prayers;

- ◆ a doubt (often more vaguely felt than consciously realized) that praying will "do any good," particularly if it hasn't seemed to "work" very well in the past;
- ◆ an all-or-nothing assumption that if prayer doesn't consume a great deal of time and produce intense feelings, then it's probably not worth attempting;
- ◆ boredom with the types of prayer you've grown up with or have become accustomed to;
- ◆ self-consciousness about taking the time to pray

Creating your own prayer experience

Anything can prompt a prayer; you need only to make a connection. Here's an example:

Prayer Over Empty Beer Cans Discarded on the Sidewalk

"Lord, please be with whoever left these cans. If they drank from sorrow, heal their hurt. If they drank to escape, help them to face their difficulty. If they were simply careless, help them and all of us to remember our duty to preserve the beauty of your creation. Help all of us to celebrate the right things, to enjoy life fully but wisely."

Prayer Without Words

Putting your feelings into words often makes prayer satisfying and helpful. But there are times when words seem to get in the way, or when the right words simply cannot be found. In these instances, don't frustrate yourself in an attempt to find the exact words—or any words at all.

Instead, simply visualize your heart opening easily like a book. Rest there, open, and let God gaze into you, into whatever is going on inside you. You will sense God telling you, "Yes...I know...I'm here."

if you spend most of the day surrounded by others who may not feel the need for prayer.

“*At every opportunity pray in the Spirit, using prayers and petitions of every sort.*”

—Ephesians 6:18

Make an honest personal inventory to see if any of these might be the actual cause or a contributing factor in “not having time” for prayer. If so, take steps to deal with it. But remember that you don’t have to wait until it has been completely resolved in order even to attempt prayer at all!

◆ ***Make a commitment to at least one definite prayer time every day.*** Spontaneous prayer, arising out of the experience of the moment, is wonderful. Sometimes it is our most fulfilling prayer. But we are not always prompted to do it. The spiritual traditions of many faiths recommend a definite daily time for prayer.

Your experience may give you a strong indication of what time of day is the best prayer time for you. Some people are better pray-ers in the early morning, others in the late evening. Don’t be fooled by a false little voice that says, “If it’s easier for you to pray at this time, then your prayer isn’t worth as much.” Certainly prayer is sometimes difficult, but it does not need to be an exercise in raw willpower in order to be worthwhile.

Check your usual daily schedule carefully. Giv-

en your knowledge of yourself and the things you have to do (*really have to do!*), what is the best time for prayer? Don’t expect a *perfect* time. You may spend your life just looking for it. And even an apparently perfect time may not feel like it when you get there. Readjust that time on days when your schedule is quite different from usual.

The secret is to achieve a balance between being definite about a time and being flexible when reality necessary. Too much definiteness may lead you to cancel prayer until tomorrow if your scheduled time has slipped by—as though prayer time were a bus that runs once a day, and since you missed today’s bus, the chance is gone. Too much flexibility often results in repeatedly postponing prayer until it *is* tomorrow!

Again, don’t fall prey to the all (or-at-least-a-lot) or-nothing syndrome. If you have usually been praying zero minutes per day and move up to five, that’s a prodigious improvement! It’s good to be inspired by stories of saints who prayed for hours a day, but don’t be intimidated by them.

◆ ***Let the events of your day be springboards for conversations with God.***

Spiritual traditions teach that the world—including our individual lives—is constant revelation: God speaking to us.

Learn how to pray in the streets or in the country.

Know how to meditate not only when you have a book in your hand but when you are waiting for a bus or riding in a train.

—Thomas Merton
New Seeds of Contemplation

Most of the Psalms arose from personally felt joy, grief, contentment, anger, confusion—indeed, the whole spectrum of human experiences.

Communicate your feelings to God at the moment you experience them. This is easier for pleasant feelings ("I'm having a good day—thanks, Lord") than for harsh ones ("I am so furious, God!"), but both are excellent material for prayer. You will feel the truth of the proverb that joy shared is doubled and sorrow shared is halved.

The elements of nature are also a rich source for prayer. You don't have to wait for something as obvious as a breathtaking sunset or a majestic thunderstorm. A small, struggling flower—even a dandelion—can prompt a prayer of thanksgiving for the small, beautiful things in your life. A dying tree (or even a junked automobile!) can prompt a prayer for the wisdom not to be too attached to the things of this life. Once you begin looking for connections, they become easier and easier to find.

You can pray for the anonymous people who dot the landscape of your life ever so briefly: the child you hear crying; the person to whom an ambulance is rushing; the lonely man on the park bench; the elderly lady laboriously and perhaps painfully tending her flowers; the just-married couple for whom car horns are honking; the impatient driver in the car next to you at a stoplight; the giddy teenagers cruising the mall; the man weaving out of the corner bar; the people whose suffering is spread across the pages of the newspaper. You are part of a spiritual network of souls

who can help one another through prayer.

None of these prayers need be—and often cannot be—long; they may take only a few seconds. But they will keep you "in contact" with God.

Lifting your heart to God

Learning to fit prayer into a busy life is not easy. If you initiate a particular schedule or approach to prayer and don't master it within a short time, don't be drastically upset with yourself—or imagine that God is either.

A good parent isn't upset with a toddler who falls and "fails" many times in learning to walk. The falls are necessary steps in learning to take real ones. God is your perfect Parent, who knows perfectly well that your falls and fumbblings in prayer are simply steps in your progress toward deeper union with God. ♦

Exploring further

Books: *Daily Prayers for Busy People* by William J. O'Malley, Winona, Minnesota, St. Mary's, 1990. *Praying Our Experiences* by Joseph F. Schmidt, Winona, Minnesota, St. Mary's, 1980. *Nine Ways to Reach God* by Sr. Bridget Meehan, Liguori, Missouri, Liguori, 1990. *It Begins With Friendship* by Greg Friedman, O.F.M., Cincinnati, Ohio, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1984.

Videocassette: *Love's Awakening*, Los Angeles, California, Franciscan Communications, (800) 421-8510.