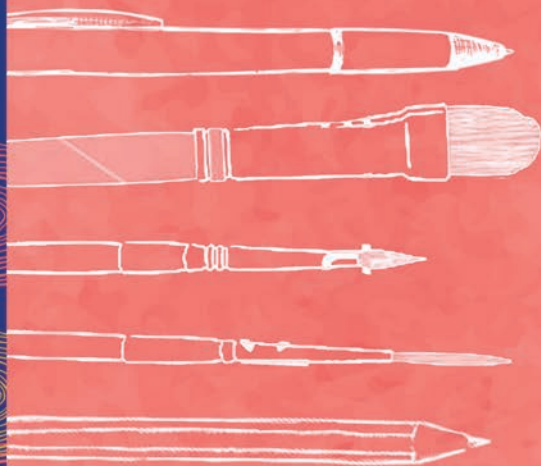


CREATIVE WAYS TO ENGAGE WITH GOD

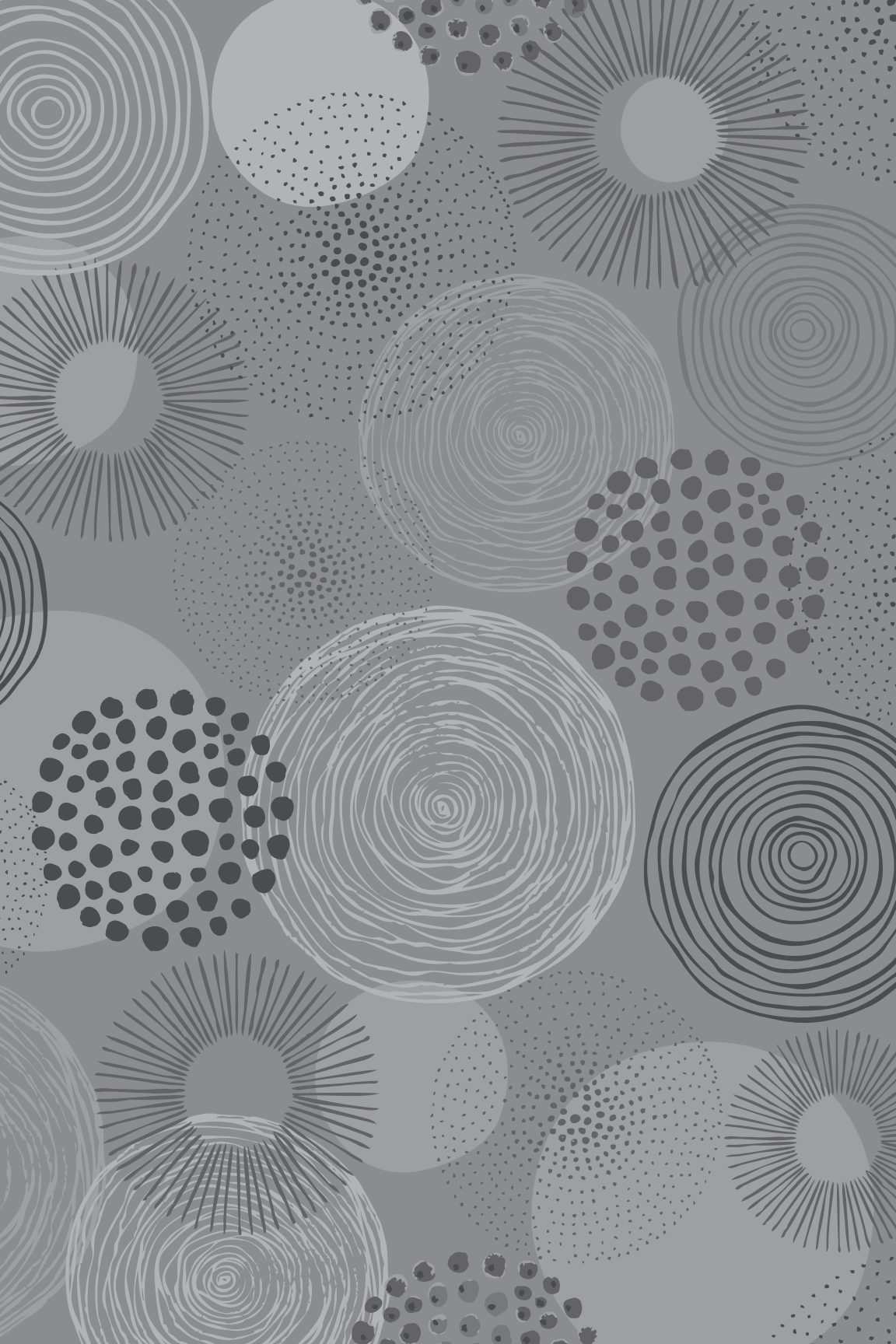
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KELLY O'DELL STANLEY

DESIGNED *to* PRAY







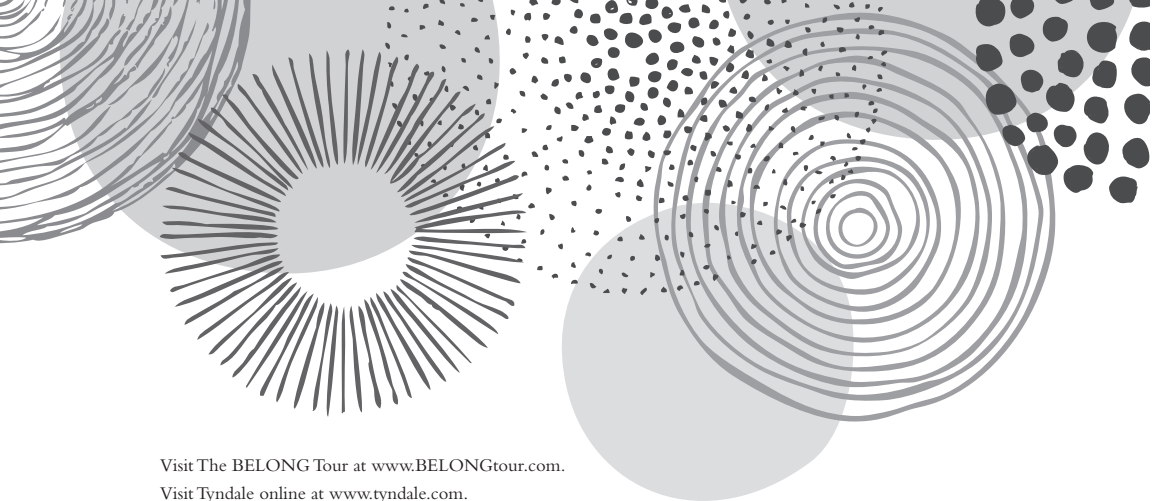
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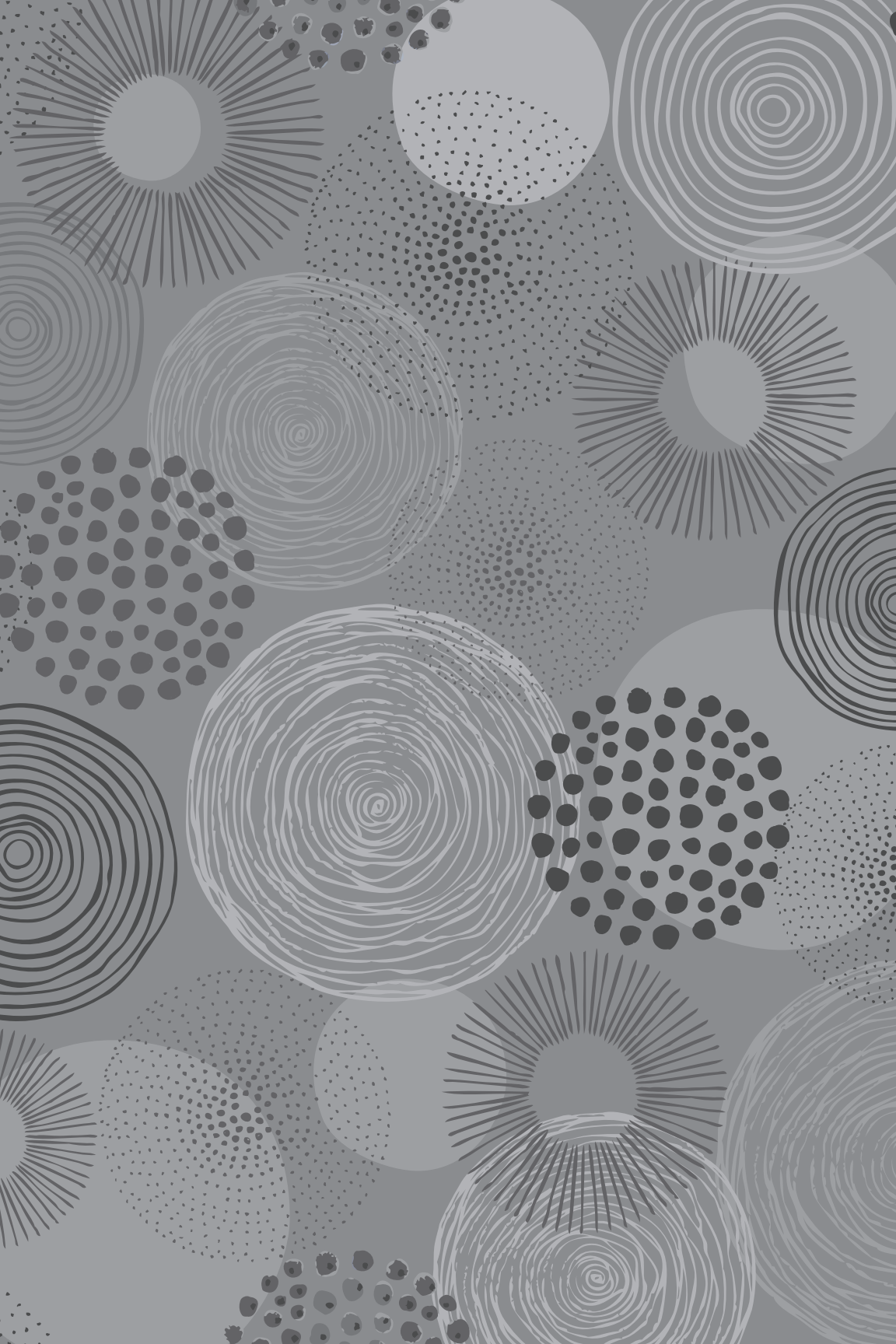
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# Surprised by Prayer

*We cannot learn about prayer except by praying.*

—J. OSWALD SANDERS, *SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP*

Apparently, prayer works.

You'd think I would know that since I wrote a book about prayer. You'd expect me to live it, to never have a doubt—let alone voice one.

You'd assume that I've had a long and rich prayer life, never beleaguered by shame. Never beating myself up for not doing enough. Rarely, if ever, pulling away from God or voicing my skepticism.

Growing up, a part of me believed that you could have faith—or you could have intellect—but you couldn't have both. A “thinking” person wouldn't rely on this hocus-pocus stuff. So you can imagine my surprise when I began to embrace the Bible and try my hand at praying—not just shoot-it-up-into-the-sky prayer but sincere, heartfelt pleas. And I started to see answers.

As with many stories that become long-standing jokes, my friend Peggy and I don't remember the circumstances behind the phone call I made to her some years ago, but we both clearly remember the words I spoke in that moment: “Well, apparently, prayer works.” They were spoken with exasperation and disbelief—and kind of a nagging resentment because I didn't want to become one of *those people* who held onto faith over reason. Whatever I'd been praying about, I got my answer. The situation

changed. And I was left grudgingly accepting what I simultaneously wanted with all of my heart to believe: God is real.

Maybe you aren't there yet. Maybe prayer is a foreign concept to you. And God? Perhaps He's not on your radar at all. But you're curious. As you go through this book, if your curiosity turns into something more and you find yourself desiring a relationship with God, but you're not sure how to get started, you will find helpful information beginning on page 195.

I know prayer doesn't seem to make sense. I cannot prove to you that God exists or promise that you will get the answers you long for. I know it's hard to trust in something you can't see. It's easier to be cynical, to put up walls of protection, to refuse to admit that you believe. Because we're deathly afraid of being wrong.

But what if we *are* wrong?

Well, let me give you my most respectful, sincere response to that perfectly valid question: So what?

Here's the thing: I don't think you *will* be wrong. I think you will be surprised.

I'm living proof that you can be a devout believer and a cynical skeptic at the same time. At times I pose questions that appear to be an attempt to disprove prayer or faith, but my motivation is pure. I want to find God. I want Him to be everything I need Him to be, all that I hope He is. And in order to do that, I have to wrestle through the difficult questions and poke holes in my doubts.

Sir Francis Bacon wrote, "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." In spite of my own doubts, I've seen the power of prayer. Heard it. Felt it. Witnessed it. Been transformed and blindsided and struck like lightning by it. It shouldn't work. It's too abstract and God is too big, too busy. I'm too small and incapable.

And yet I believe in it with all of my heart.

If you're one who secretly thinks that prayer is a trick of the mind, let me mention a small example to you. It's one you're holding in your hands right now—yes, this book—proof that although prayer itself is abstract, the results are often perfectly tangible.

After my first book, *Praying Upside Down*, released, I wondered about my next project. I wrote a new book proposal, even outlined twenty chapters, but it was missing an irresistible hook, so I left it simmering on the back burner. I'd been toying with a second idea, more of a memoir, and I loved the idea but felt it, too, was lacking its spark. My mind kept returning to a third idea—a prayer planner—one I'd kept mainly to myself, only describing it to a few close friends but not to anyone affiliated with my publisher.

Several months before, I had begun creating monthly prayer-prompt calendars to help people jump-start their prayers and break out of their ruts. But now I wanted to do a longer-term version, with interactive exercises, writing prompts, and room to explore and create. I enjoy helping people have fun with prayer. Pointing them toward something fresh. Hoping that along the way, they'll see a new aspect of God or grow closer to Him in ways they didn't expect.

I began jotting down some ideas here and there, and I sent up some brief prayers. *Lord, show me what to do next. How should I focus my energy? I'm stagnant right now, and I need to know what to work on. I need to write to draw closer to You, and I'm just not sure what I should be writing.*

I knew that no matter what direction God pointed me, I would keep alive the journal idea, because it had grabbed hold of me and wasn't letting go.

A week or so later, my agent, Blythe, called with exciting news. Tyndale wanted me to write a new book. It would be based on the concept of the “Prayer Palettes” from *Praying Upside Down*—sort of

an interactive prayer workbook. As I read the e-mail she sent me describing the details of the concept, I found myself growing stiller and stiller.

They were describing the book I'd already envisioned.

Blythe probably wondered why I wasn't jumping for joy. My heart was beating a thousand miles a minute, but I was stunned into silence. I didn't have to evaluate the concept. I wasn't afraid I couldn't do it. I'd only spoken the desires of my heart to a handful of people, none of whom had any connection to the publishing world. And yet my publisher came to me with this book idea. The very book I'd longed to write. How do you explain that, if not for God? I didn't want to move, afraid I'd wake up and realize I'd dreamed it.

This may seem like a small, superficial thing to you. It's not life and death. It's not as critical as some needs you might be facing. It's not the biggest or hardest prayer I've ever prayed, either. But it's just one tangible example of the ways that God wows me over and over again. He surprises me, fascinates me, and baffles me, often all within the same week. It makes me want to try again, go deeper, attempt something new, ask for more, and search harder.

It reminds me that against all odds and in spite of my doubts, apparently, prayer *does* work.

---

## HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

---

Which brings us back to this book, to the reason you're here. Whether you've been praying for a long time or you've never thought much about prayer, this book is designed for you.

This is an eight-week interactive workbook. Expect to spend between fifteen and thirty minutes with it each day. On the first day of each week, I will share a story with you, and then we'll fill the week with daily prayer exercises related to that theme.

You can use this book on your own or with a group. If you

use it as a group study, read Day 1 together and discuss the reflection questions as a group. Because the prayer exercises may be private, I suggest that each person work through those on their own. If someone wants to share her experiences during the group discussion, welcome that, but do not pressure others to reveal their personal prayers.

First rule: There are no rules. This book follows a consistent structure, but *you* don't have to. It's okay if you miss a day or two. Or if it takes you a month to finish Week 1. Feel free to cross out my directions and write your own. Or repeat the same exercise multiple times before moving on. If an activity doesn't interest you, close your eyes and pray, or skip to the next page, or copy Bible verses onto the blank pages.

Creativity is encouraged. Individuality is prized. Those things you're afraid to say out loud? Write them in these pages. Indulge your quirks. Find your own way. Let go of your expectations, and trust yourself. Respond to those little nudges that point you in a new direction.

Prayer, by my definition, is simply communication with God. Prayer is successful when you do it. Period. This is a private place for you to wander and stretch out your hand toward God so that He can lead you.

**DAY 1** consists of some reading, a written prayer, and a few short reflection questions.

**DAYS 2 THROUGH 6** contain a variety of interactive prayer activities—everything from coloring pages to writing prompts to physical objects that you can make. Some look more prayer-like than others, but all are prayer. Each day's exercise is followed by a mostly blank page on which you may journal, draw, take notes, doodle—or do nothing. There's also a small prayer prompt that you can use to keep your prayers going throughout the day.

**DAY 7** closes the week with a verse or concept to meditate on, something simple and restful. This is because on the seventh day God rested—and maybe you should too (see Genesis 2:2-3; Mark 6:31; Exodus 33:14). After reading that day's entry, you can stop there—or choose to write down a prayer, journal, or use the space in your preferred creative way. The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17)—but prayer does not have to be complicated. Simply resting in God's presence, with your mind tuned to Him, is still prayer.

In the back of the book, you'll find space to write **ongoing prayers**—the many requests you become aware of during the course of your days. There are always more needs than we can keep track of, and as you open your eyes to prayer, you'll discover so many more. Write them there and periodically go through the list praying for each one.

My hope? That you will engage with this book and give prayer a chance. Because if you are sincere about finding God in these pages, I promise you, He will let you.

Before you know it, your fears will recede, your doubts will become less important, and hope will rise up. You'll start to view God, this world, and your faith from a new perspective, one that you can carry with you for your whole life. And the prayer time that once felt stagnant or monotonous will become vibrant and exciting. You'll leave behind old prayer routines, in ordinary black and white, and surround yourself with vibrant colors and patterns. Your trust in Him will grow.

Because when you pray, you're building a relationship with God. And that is exactly what you were designed to do.

*Kelly O'Dell Stanley*



## Facing Your Fears

*Fear is the shadow of creativity. When we choose to create, we bring light to our fears. The darkness does not prevail over us. The creative act is inherently an act of courage.*

*We are born to far too many fears and far too great a darkness. It is only when we find the courage to create that we are freed from those fears and that darkness.*

—ERWIN MCMANUS, *THE ARTISAN SOUL*

Since I started writing about prayer, I've been reminded just how taboo the topic is. When a friend introduced me to her friend at a luncheon and said I had written a book the woman smiled. "Oh, that's great! What's your book about?"

"It's called *Praying Upside Down*," I said and watched her physically recoil. Maybe *recoil* is too strong of a word. Still, she not only leaned back, but took a step back as well.

Later, as this new acquaintance and I chatted over our chicken salads, the conversation came around to the book again, and I took the plunge. "I realize that it's ingrained in people not to talk about politics or religion. It's hard to talk about my book in business situations, because I don't want people to think I'm trying to evangelize. But the fact is, my book is about prayer, and I can't hide that."

She swallowed a drink of water as she chose her words.

“Maybe you should say ‘my book is a memoir about my personal experiences with faith.’ That might sound less threatening.”

I’ve thought a lot about her words, and I’ve come to the conclusion that her response says more about her own experiences than it does about the way I described my writing. But this conversation reminds me how many people have been hurt by religion—people who have been pushed away from church by the ones who should have been embracing them; people who were told by others that they weren’t Christians or couldn’t pray the way they did; people who don’t know if they’re qualified to pray, if they’re doing it right, if God will hear them if they’re not already living 100 percent for Him.

When your experiences color your perceptions of God, you may have trouble fully embracing prayer. You might have put up walls to keep from feeling inadequate or unqualified or uncomfortable.

Can I let you in on a little secret? I feel inadequate, too.

Whenever someone refers to me as an expert on prayer, I want to laugh out loud. I *did* write a book about prayer. It’s not an illogical conclusion. But if you could see inside my mind, the speed at which my thoughts spin from one topic to the next might make you dizzy.

But maybe that’s the point. Perhaps that’s exactly why I’m the one who wrote this. To tell you that it’s okay not to be perfect. God doesn’t expect perfection, and when *we* do, we’re setting ourselves up for failure.

It’s okay to forget to pray or to be distracted and interrupted. We can rely on the truth that God’s mercies are renewed daily. To start over again tomorrow. It’s all right to let God’s grace carry you. It’s normal to feel like you’re out of your element or in over your head. It’s not unusual to hold concurrent but conflicting feelings—you’ve been hurt by some of God’s people, or seemingly by God Himself, and you’re afraid. Yet you sense,

somewhere in that indefinable part of you, that if you can just reach Him, it will be worth it. You are not sure, but you hope. You wonder. Whatever it is, it's *enough*.

Because there *is* one fact I know: Prayer does not get its power from me. It comes from God. From the One who hears us. Who welcomes us. Who beckons us daily, moment by moment, to turn back. To remember. To lose ourselves in Him instead of in the momentum of our overscheduled, too-full days.

The prayer activities within these pages are not a magical method for harnessing the power of the almighty God. They're simply new ways for you to reach out to Him, exercises to develop your creativity and open your eyes to discover God in a new way. Because even though God doesn't require us to vary our methods, I get bored easily—and you might too. Been there, done that, ready to try something new.

Simply by praying, simply by trying, you will meet God. You will be changed. And if you keep your eyes open in the process, you will see Him. If you listen, you will hear. You will learn to believe that He can do all the things you long for Him to do. And you'll discover that, unlike us, God never fails. He never has doubts, and He never forgets. He is the expert, the author, the authority. Our prayer is made perfect because the Perfect One receives it.

All you have to do is offer it to Him.

Won't you?



*God, we all come to You with certain fears. Memories of times when we didn't live up to certain standards or were misunderstood. An awareness of our failings—whether it's a short attention span, limited self-discipline, or an overcrowded calendar. Sometimes we*

*don't know where to start or what to say. Or how to find You again after we've turned away.*

*But here's the miracle: You are still there. You still want to hear from us. You still care. And if we ask for help in turning to You, in finding You, You will give it.*

*So, we're asking. Help us. Draw our minds to You. Increase our desire for You. Let us discover that there is nothing to fear, that You alone can always be trusted. Meet us here in these pages. Make Yourself known. Amen.*

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Does fear keep you from praying?

What are you afraid of?

What made you pick up this book?

At this point, do you *believe* prayer matters—or are you here to try to figure that out?

What are your hopes?



## Doodling Around

*If you can't pray as you want to, pray as you can. God knows what you mean.*

—VANCE HAVNER

May I suggest that prayer has an image problem? People think it is an exclusive language reserved for holy men and women clothed in velvet robes and large hats, intoning grand words in powerful voices. Or we imagine black-clad nuns taking vows of poverty and celibacy, kneeling by candlelight in austere surroundings. We think of prayer as serious and solemn. Formal. Many pray in King James English rather than the English we use every day. *Lord, God, Thou art holy. I beseech Thee. . . .*

If that's the way you speak, more power to you. But I'm more of a slang kind of girl. I've been known to laugh while I pray. I make fun of myself. And, occasionally, I say things people think might not belong in prayer.

If I could rebrand prayer, I'd position it as approachable and rejuvenating. Informal. And yes, even fun. Approaching God with a light heart isn't irreverent. It's just being real.

So today, I want you to doodle your prayers.

---

**DIRECTIONS:** Write names or situations in the shapes already drawn on the page, and then fill in the rest of the space with curlicues and spirals, hearts and flowers, zigzags and stripes. Add more prayers. Write your name. Get out your markers and color. All you have to do to turn your doodles into prayer is to mentally offer them up to God. "As I write and draw, hear the desires of my heart and accept this as my prayer. Amen."



WEEK 1 | DAY 2

---

WRITE | DRAW | EXPLORE | PRAY



PRAYER PROMPT . . . Pray for someone who makes you laugh.



## Rays of Gratitude

RELATED BIBLE VERSES:  
Matthew 6:8; Psalm 100; Psalm 95:1-6

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name.*

—PSALM 100:4

*If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.*

—MEISTER ECKHART

I don't know about you, but at any given time I could list thirty or forty things I need. They may not all be for me—my friend Missie needs healing, and another friend's son needs help with a legal issue. I could stand a little more income, because money is tight this month. And my son hurt his big toe.

There's always something.

But prayer isn't just about asking. It's also about remembering who God is. Thanking Him for—and reminding ourselves of—the things He has already done.

Psalm 100 is one of my favorites because it reminds us that the best way to enter into His courts—to come into His presence—is with praise. So today, don't ask for a thing. He already knows the desires of your heart. Let your gratitude radiate out from your core as you thank God for the many blessings He has provided.



**DIRECTIONS:** Create individual “rays” in the accompanying sun graphic, formed by words or phrases describing something you are thankful for. And feel the warmth of living life with gratitude.

WEEK 1 | DAY 3

---

DRAW | EXPLORE | PRAY | WRITE



PRAYER PROMPT . . . Pray for someone's son.



## The Posture of Prayer

*Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.*

—ROMANS 12:1

I've prayed sitting in a pew. Balanced on my knees on a cushioned kneeler. Standing at the altar, hands on another person's shoulder. In a circle at prayer group, joined hand to hand in unity. Waiting in my car in the carpool line at school. Walking along a beach. I've pressed my face into my carpet, distraught and wordless, and I've stood with both arms raised high above my head with confidence and praise.

But I've discovered that my experience changes when I alter the physical posture of my prayer, even when my words remain the same.

Standing with arms open toward the sky makes me feel exultant. I close my eyes and imagine God's light shining upon me, His Spirit pouring into me. I'm coming boldly before His throne.

Bowing on my knees fills me with humility. I remember who He is and offer Him respect. I ask Him, humbly and reverently, for help.

When I stand, arms outstretched, palms up, I'm reaching out to a Friend. In return, He grasps my hands, and we stand face-to-face, talking.

When I am facedown on the floor, awash in emotions, I am physically responding to the awesomeness of my God. I am bowing as low as I can, feeling the weight of His greatness, wanting to honor Him.

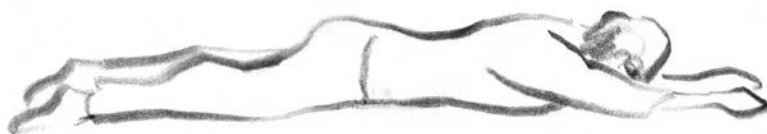
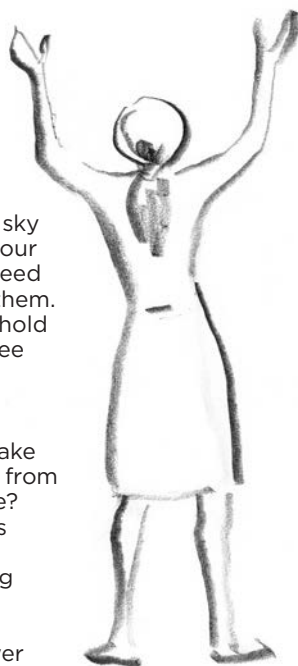
Lying in bed at night, whispering to Him, unloading the burdens I've carried all day, I feel an intimacy and can imagine His arms holding me tight as He rocks me to sleep.

**DIRECTIONS:** Find a comfortable spot. Close yourself in your bedroom if you want privacy. Or if you have young children, let them try this with you.

**Pray** in several different positions. Kneel or stand or lie down. Raise your arms to the sky or clasp them in front of you or hold your palms up on your knees. You don't need words, although you're free to use them. Focus your thoughts upward, and hold the position for a little while and see where your thoughts go.

*Reflect:* Pay attention to the different feelings each posture elicits. Which make you feel happier? Closer or farther from God? Awkward or comfortable? Humble and contrite or joyous and filled with praise? Journal your thoughts on the following page.

There is no right or wrong answer here . . . it's all just exploration. Reaching out to the One who wants us to encounter Him, whatever position we are in when we do.



WEEK 1 | DAY 4

---

EXPLORE | PRAY | WRITE | DRAW



**PRAYER PROMPT** . . . Pray for someone who has  
taught you something about prayer.



## Stumbling Blocks

*It shall be said, “Build up, build up, prepare the way,  
remove every obstruction from my people’s way.”*

—ISAIAH 57:14, ESV

When I am hesitant to pray, it’s often because I have a bad attitude. I’m feeling rebellious. I’m tired. In fact, there was a long time period in which I didn’t pray because I was mad at God.

Some of you may be cringing, thinking, *She can’t say that!*

But it’s the truth. My mom died of small-cell lung cancer, and I was devastated. God—who was supposed to be a God of healing, right?—hadn’t healed her. She was gone and I was alone, and I wasn’t sure I could trust Him any longer. He knew what I needed—her. And yet she was no longer here.

Still I knew I should pray. I knew God would be able to bring me through it.

It just took a while before I was ready to let Him.

Maybe you don’t have the stubborn, toddler-like attitude I had. But maybe you’ve had your own crushing pains. Maybe you were abused or someone stole your spouse or you buried a child or you’re watching your parent slowly fade away.

Or maybe you see people every day who profess to be Christians but who certainly don't act like it. You don't want any part of that, so you stay away.

There are millions of reasons why we might stay away.

However, there is one compelling reason not to: God.

Only with God will we see hope again. Only through God can our brokenness be made whole, our emotions soothed, our attitudes adjusted. Only with God can we heal.

It's normal to stumble. But the best way to keep from falling is to take a close look at the obstacles before you.

## WEEK 1 | DAY 5

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**DIRECTIONS:** Write about the stumbling block (or blocks) that keep you from praying. Afraid God won't answer? Don't know what to say? Convinced you aren't good enough to go to Him in prayer? Whatever your stumbling block is, write it down. And ask God to remove it.

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WEEK 1 | DAY 5

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PRAY | WRITE | DRAW | EXPLORE



PRAYER PROMPT . . . Pray for someone facing a hurdle.



## Faith, Not Fear

*We live by faith, not by sight.*

—2 CORINTHIANS 5:7, NIV

The opposite of faith isn't doubt. It's fear.

At my church, everyone prays out loud at the same time. It intimidated me at first, thinking everyone was listening, but most of the time, there's anonymity in the noise. Usually you just hear snatches of people's prayers—key words like *healing* and *hope*, *love* and *protect* jump out, but you don't hear one person specifically.

One night, though, a woman was praying for a desperate situation. Her son was being charged with attempted manslaughter. He'd dropped his baby—a horrible accident, but that's all it was. He faced jail time and the possible loss of his baby.

I'll never forget that moment. Because as I prayed for this woman, her son, and her grandson, all I could hear were her words. Three of them, repeated over and over. "Faith, not fear. Faith, not fear. Faith, not fear."

That simple act demonstrated the most beautiful kind of faith and trust. The best way to face fear is to turn in the other direction—not away from what you're afraid of, but toward what you want (and the only One who can provide it). To lean on God and trust Him even when it is scary. *Especially* when it is scary.

Every day, even in smaller things, we have a choice to make. What will you choose?

**DIRECTIONS:** Think about your current prayer requests. On the left side of the chart, write what it would look like to dwell on fear, and on the right, describe what it would look like to focus instead on faith. Ask God to help you with your choices and to strengthen your faith in each situation.

FEAR	MY PRAYER REQUEST:	
FEAR	MY PRAYER REQUEST:	
FEAR	MY PRAYER REQUEST:	
FEAR	MY PRAYER REQUEST:	

WEEK 1 | DAY 6

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WRITE | DRAW | EXPLORE | PRAY



PRAYER PROMPT . . . Pray for someone in a desperate situation.



(DAY OF REST)

## *A Place of Refuge*

*Do not be afraid, for I am with you.*


—ISAIAH 43:5

When I was a little girl, there was a space in the cornfield by my house where the seed had washed away in the heavy spring rains and nothing grew. A small round patch of nothingness, bordered by cornstalks that were about half grown. If I squeezed between the tight rows, in just a few steps I could be in that private space, and when I knelt down, the corn surrounded me on all sides. I was only twenty or thirty feet in, but nobody outside the field could tell I was there. I felt invisible. And invincible. Because I was hiding in a safe place.

You don't need a field to find the same security.

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**DIRECTIONS:** In your mind, go to a quiet space. Picture yourself being embraced by God. Close your eyes and simply breathe Him in. Sit in the solitude. He is with us. Not just us collectively, but with each of us, personally, individually, exactly the way we need Him to be. Right now. And when we are with Him, we are in the safest of all possible places. Whether anyone can see us or not. Thank Him by coloring in the next page.



DO NOT  
BE AFRAID,  
FOR I AM  
WITH YOU.

ISAIAH 43:5

WEEK 1 | DAY 7

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DRAW | EXPLORE | PRAY | WRITE



PRAYER PROMPT . . . Pray for someone's safety  
(emotional, physical, or any other kind of security).