How to do Daily Devotions

To think that we sinful people can have a relationship with God that lasts into eternity is extraordinary. For, while God designed us to be in relationship with him, we have rebelled against him and have disqualified ourselves from that perfect relationship because of our sin. But God did something amazing. He sent Jesus into this world to die for all our sins. Jesus then rose to life again to show that he has power over life and death and offers us eternal life which is all about an everlasting relationship with God. The wonder of all this is that we are able to enter into that relationship right now, which means that we can talk with God in a personal way, which would never have happened without Jesus restoring our relationship with God.

The idea of daily devotions is that we meet regularly with God. We read the Bible and pray to him, but we can find it hard to do this well. We are busy, easily distracted, and can find the whole thing overwhelming. Here are just a few thoughts to help you get started with your Daily Devotions.

## Finding Time

In our busyness, it can be really hard to find time to be with God. The pressures of work, study, family, as well as other commitments, can mean that we struggle to find time to meet with God. This may mean that you will have to be creative in finding time.

First thing in the morning can be really good. Getting up early and meeting with God means that you start the day with God, showing that he is the priority in your life. For some people, the best time is just before bed, at the end of the day. It is a way of slowing down and bringing to God all the things you have done in your day. Others do it on the train or bus. Still others find a regular time when they are on their own during the day. It may even be that the only way you can do this is with someone else. Married couples can do their devotions together and therefore be an encouragement to each other. Even families can do it at dinner time. Find a regular time and place and set it aside for God.

But how much time will you need? It is always best to start off small but don’t make it so small that you are not slowing down and talking with God. So, I would suggest beginning with a 10 – 15 minute time slot. This will give you time to slow down and relax, to ready yourself, and begin to concentrate. It gives you time to read the Bible, to reflect on what it says and to pray. However, do not be surprised that as you learn how to do this well that your time slot grows. One other tip is to not watch the clock. If you need to finish by a certain time then set an alarm for your finishing time so that you are concentrating on your devotions and not on what is going to happen after your devotions.

## What to Read?

It is best to read the Bible. There are a lot of devotional books and diaries at Christian bookshops which have very little bible content and lots of thoughts from preachers, teachers and pastors. These books can be helpful, but they are not the Word of God. They are the words of people. We need to hear from God and engage with his Word. So, if you want to buy a devotional book, please look for something which makes you read the Bible and asks you to examine it.

Some may ask, “Which book of the Bible should I start with?” You can choose any book of the Bible and just start reading, but a good place to start is with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But whatever book you decide to read, make sure you read it in the context of the whole Bible. Books like “God’s Big Picture” by Vaughan Roberts is helpful for understanding this. Also consider what kind of writing it is. The Bible is full of different kinds of writing: narrative, biography, parables, letters, poetry, proverbs and wisdom sayings, instructions, and apocalyptic (full of visions and word pictures). You need to read each kind of writing differently. Then think about what the writer might have been trying to say to the original reader and their social and cultural context before you consider what God wants you to know in today’s context.

You might want more guidance in which books of the Bible you want to read and when you read them. A Bible reading plan is very helpful. There are Bible reading plans which help you to read the whole Bible in a year, in 3 years, and so on. You can search for one of them online, through an app, or use an older prayer book which has daily readings. You can buy a Bible Study book which is normally used for Bible Study Groups and use it for personal reflection. Here, at Merrylands Anglican, we are trying to provide you with regular Bible readings with 3 reflection questions per reading which are meant to help you reflect on the passage. The idea is that these questions will get you started as you think about what you are reading, but we would also encourage you to think further than just the 3 questions as you reflect on what God might be saying to you. One way of reflecting is to write down your answers to those questions, or simply write a short reflection on what the passage is saying. It is not meant to be a big essay or a lot of hard work, it is just meant to help you concentrate as you reflect on the passage.

# Prayer

We have often said that prayer is just talking to God, but we need to be careful about how we talk to God. We must remember that we are speaking to the God of the universe, the one who created it and continues to sustain it. We must remember that we cannot take another step or another breath without God allowing us to do so. We are totally reliant on him for our very lives. God is also our Saviour. Without Jesus’ death and resurrection, we would not be able to enter into this everlasting relationship with God. In fact, as lawbreakers, we deserve to be punished for breaking God’s law, but Jesus brings us forgiveness. So, when we pray, we need to remember that we are talking to the powerful and awesome God who loves us so much that he died to save us. He owes us nothing, but we owe him everything. We must, therefore, come before him with the respect and honour he deserves, showing great humility, thankfulness, and appreciation for being able to enjoy the kind of intimate and personal relationship he offers us through Jesus.

## Formal or Informal Prayers

Formal prayers are prayers that are already written out, like the prayers in a prayer book. Some people prefer to use these prayers because they are not very confident in praying in their own words. Using formal prayers can be a good way of starting to pray if you are not used to talking to God with your own words. Prayers like The Prayer of Preparation, A Confession, The Lord’s Prayer, and a Blessing, can be a very helpful start and can easily be found in a prayer book or online at <http://www.commonprayer.org.au/> <http://www.sundayservices.anglican.asn.au/>

Informal prayers are where you simply speak to God in your own words. These prayers are personal prayers and you get to talk to God about how you feel, about your concerns, about the needs of specific people. The next section (ACTS) is a simple way of organising informal prayers, but I like to use a mix of formal and informal prayers. I like to start with The Prayer of Preparation and finish with a blessing or benediction. Sometimes I add The Lord’s Prayer, or a Confession Prayer, and in between I pray personal prayers for different things, which I will outline how to do this later.

## ACTS

One way of praying informal or personal prayers is summed up with the word ACTS. Each letter from this word is the first letter of another word which helps us to remember how to pray. **ACTS** stands for **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication.

**ADORATION:** is all about praising God. We can praise God as our Creator, Sustainer, Saviour, God and King. We can praise him for all the good things he gives us and for our relationship with him in general. A great example of this is found in Revelation…

**Revelation 4:9-11** Whenever the living beings give glory and honor and thanks to the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever), 10 the twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever). And they lay their crowns before the throne and say, 11 "You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased."

**CONFESSION:** is all about repenting of the wrong things we have done and restoring our relationship with God. You may have noticed that we have a Confession and Repentance time each month in the Moring Service at Merrylands Anglican Church. Part of the reason we do this is to provide you with a model of how to confess your sins and repent. It is good to examine yourself, to come humbly before God recognising your sinfulness, to seek forgiveness, and to thank God for your forgiveness. Some people think that this is a negative thing to do. They say it is too negative to concentrate on your faults rather than looking to the positive or good things within you. They say that we spend too much time concentrating on our guilt. But the Bible tells us that we should not deceive ourselves and think we are better than we are.

**1 John 1:8-9** If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. 9 But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.

We must be real with ourselves and recognise our sinfulness and need for forgiveness. Now, as Christians, we believe that Jesus has already forgiven all our sins, even the ones we have not committed yet. So, why do we need to continue confessing our sins? There are 2 reasons. Firstly, confessing sins helps us deal with any feelings of guilt we might have because of what we have done. We are reminded that God forgives us as we confess our sins to him. Knowing that we are forgiven takes away that feeling of guilt as God draws us back to him through forgiveness.

**James 4:7-10** So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. 9 Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

Secondly, confessing sins helps us to practice repentance. Repentance is all about turning away from our sinfulness and asking God to help us to live his way. Because we still sin, we need to continually repent, and confessing our sins is a good way of bringing us to repentance.

**THANKSGIVING:** Gratitude and thankfulness is the right response to God’s forgiveness. Knowing that we are forgiven and saved into an everlasting relationship with God should make us thankful for all that Jesus has done for us.

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** Always be joyful. 17 Never stop praying. 18 Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

During your prayer time, take a moment to thank God for all kinds of things. For answered prayer, for the abundance of food, clothing, and shelter, for school or work, for family and friends. An attitude of gratitude helps us to always be thankful to God and gives us a positive outlook on life, even during the hardest of times.

**SUPPLICATION:** is a very old word but it means “to humbly ask for things”. In other words, this is the time when we humbly ask God to help us. You can pray for sick people, for those in need, for politicians and others who make decisions about how we live, for the church, for missionaries, for family and friends, for certain people to become followers of Jesus. There are all kinds of things that we can pray for.

**Philippians 4:6-7** Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

Notice that we are told to pray for our needs. In today’s society we often confuse our needs with our desires or wants, like the child who says, “I need that toy!” We must not act like spoilt children, making demands of God purely for our own selfish desires, and throwing tantrums when we don’t get our own way. God is God and he decides how things will happen. That is why we should always ask God for things with a humble heart. However, it is not completely wrong to pray for something we might really want. Many people pray for their family members to become followers of Jesus. This is a good thing and we should bring these kinds of desires to God.

Finally, the best example of how to pray is seen in the Lord’s Prayer. You might notice that 3 of the 4 parts to the ACTS form of prayer are in this prayer. See if you can find them.

**Matthew 6:9-13** [Jesus said] Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. 10 May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today the food we need, 12 and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. 13 And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.

## Organising Your Prayer Points

Sometimes you can have so much to pray for, you can find it hard to remember everything. You start praying, knowing that you have lots of prayer points, but you end up praying for the same things every time (sometimes more than once in a single prayer time). You try to remember all the different things you want to pray for but just can’t remember them all. Well, there are a few ways of helping you to do this a bit better.

**Prayer Journals** and are a very good way of keeping your prayers together. It is a bit like writing down your reflections from your Devotional Bible Reading. You simply write short prayers or even just prayer points to help you remember what you want to pray about that day. One advantage of this is that you can look at what you wrote in previous entries to see how God has answered certain prayers and to remind you of some of the prayer points you might have forgotten to pray for in more recent times.

**Prayer Diaries** are very similar to Prayer Journals, but the diary helps you to pray for certain things on certain days. So, you might pray for 3 missionaries – 1 on Monday, 1 on Wednesday, and 1 on Friday. That way you pray for all of them weekly but concentrate on 1 of them on a certain day. You can apply this idea to all kinds of different prayer points. Tuesdays could be for church ministries. Thursday could be for your Growth Group members. Other days might be about political and social issues. Of course, there will also be things that you pray for every day but Prayer Diaries are all about planning your day/week/month/year of prayer.

**Prayer Cards** are another way of organising your prayer life. You can buy a set of palm cards, or system cards (127x76mm), and start a collection of prayer points on these cards. You can organise these cards into groups like “Family”, “The Sick”, or “Personal Needs”, and then pull out a selection of cards for that day’s prayer time.

**Prayer Apps** have also been very helpful. They are mainly designed to be used on a smart phone rather than a computer but the advantage of this is that you can make a new prayer point or start a prayer session anywhere you can use your phone. I have found PrayerMate to be excellent and it is free. You can use downloaded prayers which are a set of formal prayers or you can type in your own prayer points. You can organise your prayers into groups and categories and you can set PrayerMate to provide you with a certain number of prayers per day. There are even mission organisations and different groups who put their prayer points onto PrayerMate and you can subscribe to those prayers so that you can pray for them as well.

## Final Thoughts

One of the problems with Prayer Apps is that you are looking at your phone and people can get very distracted with other things on their phone. Distraction is a big problem with Daily Devotions and you could say that it is part of the Devil’s work so that you are not strengthening your relationship with God. Sometimes, your mind can wander while praying and the next thing you know, you are thinking about all kinds of different things instead of praying. Praying out loud can be helpful as it puts other things out of your mind while you are concentrating on what you are saying to God. Of course, you can’t do this everywhere (like the train or work lunch room) so you have to work out when and where you can pray out loud to do this kind of Daily Devotion.

Another danger is that Daily Devotions become just another thing that you do in your day. You add it to your long list of chores and the joy of meeting with God soon disappears. Sometimes, those Prayer Apps, Journals, Diaries, etc. which were designed to help you concentrate, become a thing you need to fill in with writing rather than helping you relate to God. If you start feeling this way then you need to make sure there is time in your devotions when you are actually engaging with God. Put your pen down, stop all distractions, and just meditate on God.

Lastly, people can feel bad about not being able to do their Daily Devotions as often as they wanted to do them. They fall behind on the Bible Readings, they don’t get around to praying, and find it a struggle to do their Daily Devotions regularly. This struggle brings about negative emotions and they begin to think it is too hard and they decide to give up trying. I want to encourage you by asking you to turn the word “struggle” around. Instead of thinking of it in a negative way, “I’m struggling with my devotions. I forget or get busy. It is too much of a struggle, so I’m giving up.” Think about it in a positive way, “I am going to struggle for my devotions. I want them to happen and I will struggle against all those distractions to make them happen.”

I pray that God will help you as you seek to meet with him every day. May he fill you with the Holy Spirit and draw you closer to him through the forgiveness that Jesus offers. May you read his Word and speak to him in prayer every day.