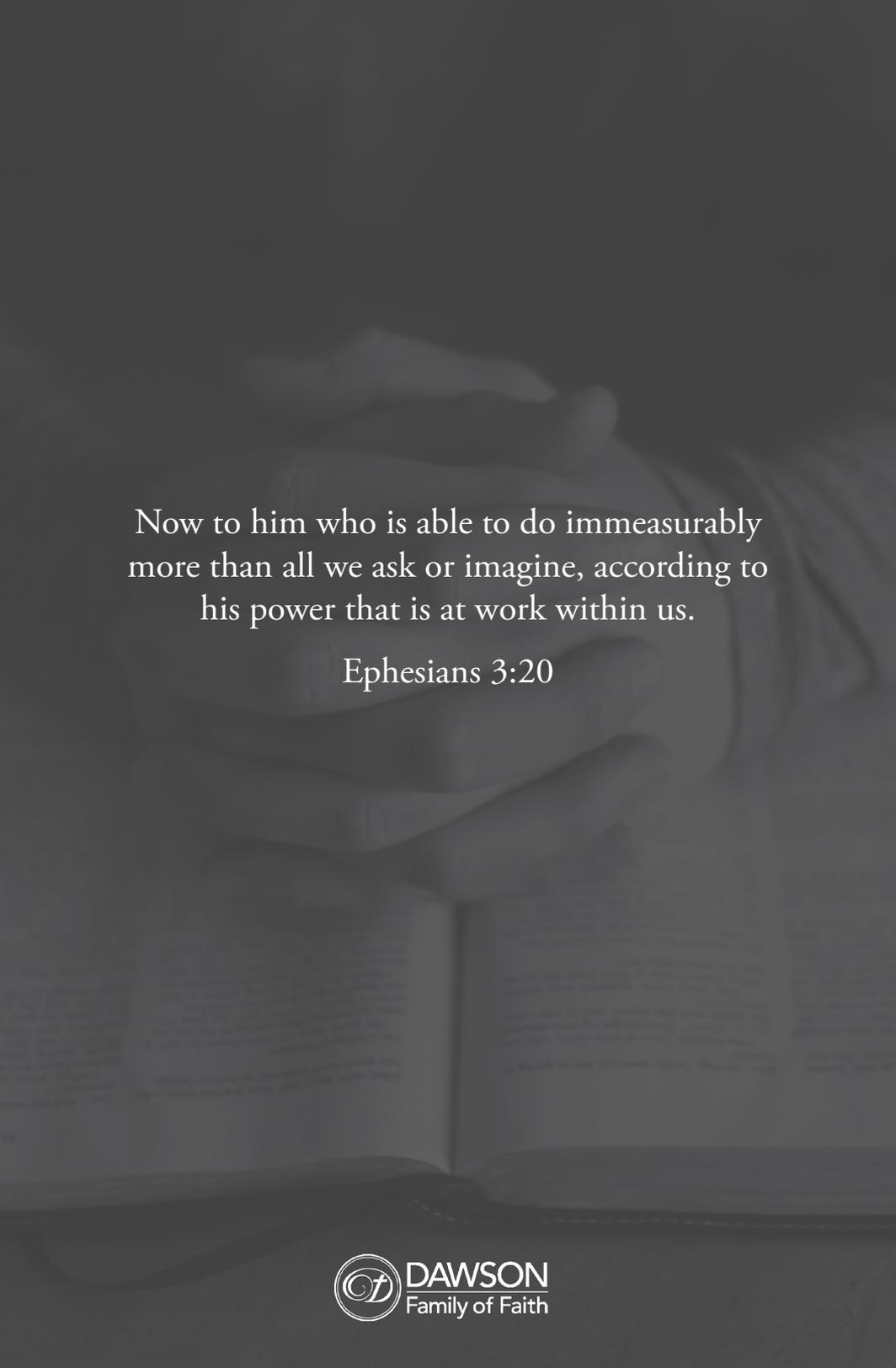


———— A Guide to ————
Prayer & Fasting



Now to him who is able to do immeasurably
more than all we ask or imagine, according to
his power that is at work within us.

Ephesians 3:20

INTRODUCTION

This year as a Family of Faith, we have been focusing on the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting. We have asked and are continuing to ask God's Spirit to renew and revive us for His purpose in our personal lives and in the corporate life of Dawson. As we consider new ways to reach out to our community and our world, both through our Go Love Tell missions initiative and through all of our ministry areas, we are asking God to take us beyond our limits.

It is our privilege as Christians to pray to a God who desires to hear from us. Richard Foster, noted author and theologian, has written, "Prayer is the human response to the perpetual outpouring of love by which God lays siege to every soul." We pray with expectancy, trusting that God is who He says He is and will do what He says He will do. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul encourages us to, "pray continually." Jesus said in John 14:13-14, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

Fasting, however, is not something we talk about often. It is almost a forgotten practice, but it is an important part of worship and prayer. We fast in this life because we believe in the life to come. We fast from what we can taste and see, because we have tasted and seen the goodness of the invisible and infinite God, and we are desperately hungry for more of Him.

Fasting is designed to express our desire for God and our discontent in a fallen world. It is for those who truly feel desperate for God. Through fasting, we humble ourselves before God and acknowledge that we need Him more than anything this world has to offer.

As we focus on prayer and fasting as a church, may we trust in God and believe that He can do more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). We pray that God will lead each of us to a deeper faith in Him through prayer and fasting.



This booklet is a resource on your journey of becoming the person God is calling you to be. There are excellent resources available if you would like to learn more about prayer, fasting, or any of the other spiritual disciplines. The resources we have used in the booklet are listed on the last page.

We hope this emphasis on prayer and fasting will encourage you to seek God as never before. We celebrate what God has already done this year and anticipate what He will do.

Dawson Discipleship Team

FROM START TO FINISH

A challenging part of prayer and fasting is taking your focus off the world and turning it toward God. Many things distract us from time alone with God: work, leisure, worries, social and civic commitments, even church activities. In Hebrews, these items are labeled as “everything that hinders.”

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1–2)

The writer of Hebrews uses the analogy of a race to depict the believer’s life of faithful living. All the faithful disciples who have run before us are in the grandstands, encouraging us to run strong. In front of us is the track, one prepared beforehand by God. At the end is the finish line, where Jesus is standing, waiting to congratulate all who cross it. The image that is used is of a runner taking off his warm-up clothes so he is left with only his running attire. By doing so, he has nothing to encumber him during the race.

What slows us in reaching the finish line? One translation of “everything that hinders” is “weight.” The weight in your life is not sin. Rather, it is anything that keeps you from running the race set before you, anything that keeps you from achieving all that God wants to do in and through your life, and ultimately in and through our church. This weight normally comes in the form of good things but becomes a distraction to our spiritual growth. These are the things that we must lay down so that we may run unencumbered in our race of faith. Because this weight is not as obvious, it is what interferes most with reaching the finish line.



Part of prayer and fasting is creating an environment in which we can encounter God. You also may be called during this time of prayer and fasting to set aside some good things to allow yourself more time with God.

Look over the list below and commit to set aside some normal activities to give yourself more time for prayer, Bible study, silence, and solitude:

TV	Computer/Video games
Watching Sports	Music/Playlists
Shopping	Netflix
Social Media/Internet	Cooking/Entertaining
Information/Email	Movies
Leisure Reading	Working Out
Yard Work	Talking on the Phone

Ask God to reveal some areas that you can periodically set aside in order to spend more time in prayer. As we throw off what slows us down and the sin that hinders our progress, we will find ourselves able to spend more time seeking God's face, listening to His Word, and being equipped to persevere and to run our race.

Only as we focus our lives on Him can we hear His plan for our lives individually and corporately as the body of Christ.

WHY PRAY?

Prayer is about spending time with God and uniting our hearts with His. It is our love for God and a desire to know Him more that leads us to pray. Richard Foster writes in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, “The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are increasingly conformed to the image of the Son.”

While most Christians understand the basic truths about prayer, most of us find great difficulty devoting time to it every day. It is true that a close, personal walk with the Lord is impossible without daily quiet time—a time of listening and speaking to our heavenly Father. None of us would expect to maintain a good relationship with a wife or husband or close friend if we never spoke to that person. How much more important is it to seek to be near the One who made us and whose will and work we desire to do?

Likewise, it is impossible for the body of Christ—the church—to stay on course if we do not faithfully and regularly unite our hearts and voices in prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our decisions and our actions. We pray because Jesus told us to pray. We pray because Jesus Himself prayed. We pray because it changes us, and we pray because it brings about the will of God in our family, church, and in our society.

WHY FAST?

Biblically, prayer and fasting go together. And, as with prayer, fasting is about God. However, in our day, the biblical principle of fasting has been almost forgotten. Throughout history, God's people have made fasting an important part of their worship and prayer. Fasting is God's way of helping us focus on matters of the Spirit; it enables us to gain control of our appetites so that we can direct our mental and spiritual energies toward Him. Fasting, as described by theologian Dallas Willard in his classic book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, “(c)onfirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food.”

In *Spiritual Disciples Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun wrote this about the purpose of fasting:

Fasting is not a magical way to manipulate God into doing our will; it's not a way to get God to be an accomplice to our plans. Neither is fasting a spiritual way to lose weight or control others. Fasting clears us out and opens us up to intentionally seeking God's will and grace in a way that goes beyond normal habits of worship and prayer. While fasting, we are one on one with God, offering him the time and attentiveness we might otherwise be giving to eating, shopping, or watching television.

Fasting is an opportunity to lay down an appetite—an appetite for food, for media, for shopping. This act of self-denial may not seem huge—it's just a meal or a trip to the mall—but it brings us face to face with the hunger at the core of our being. Fasting exposes how we try to keep empty hunger at bay and gain a sense of well-being by devouring creature comforts. Through self-denial we begin to recognize what controls us. Our small denials of the self show us just how little taste we actually have for sacrifice or time with God.

Again, Calhoun reminds us that we are not “fasting for fasting sake” or to be legalistic. Instead,

Fasting reminds us that we care about ‘soul’ things. We care about the church. We care about the world. We care about doing God's will. Thus we willingly set aside a little comfort so we can listen and attend to the voice and nourishment of God alone. For God can give us grace and comfort and nurture we cannot get on our own.



WHAT IS FASTING?

Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes. Fasting normally involves abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not water, for a determined amount of time with specific spiritual goals. Calhoun gives this definition of fasting: “A fast is the self-denial of normal necessities in order to intentionally attend to God in prayer. Bringing attachments and craving to the surfaces opens up a place for prayer. This physical awareness of emptiness is the reminder to turn to Jesus who alone can satisfy.” It involves giving up the physical to attain greater spiritual insights.

IS FASTING FOR TODAY?

In his book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard J. Foster writes:

The constant propaganda fed us today convinces us that if we do not have three large meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation. This, coupled with the popular belief that it is a positive virtue to satisfy every human appetite, has made fasting seem obsolete.

We see the importance of fasting in our modern society as we continue to examine Foster’s words on the spiritual discipline of fasting:

- Fasting must center on God.
- Fasting reveals the things that control us.
- Fasting reminds us that ultimately we are sustained by “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Our physical body requires food, but God sustains us.
- Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. It is easy to begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. Fasting also shows us how quickly we begin to crave things we do not need and can become enslaved by them.

WHICH SCRIPTURES SUPPORT FASTING?

The list of biblical characters who fasted begins with Jesus and includes Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna, and Paul. Many well-known Christians throughout church history fasted and gave testimony to its value and power.

Fasting has solid scriptural roots. As Jesus was teaching his disciples about fasting, he said “when” we fast, not “if” we fast.

- Jesus fasted and gave instructions about fasting. (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-4; Matthew 6:16-18)
- The early church prayed and fasted. (Acts 13:2-3; Acts 14:23)

There are also many examples in the Old Testament:

- In the book of Joel, God called His people to pray and fast for a time of repentance, personal commitment, and revival. (Joel 1:14)
- Samuel called the people of Israel to repentance and confession following a time of corporate fasting. (1 Samuel 7:6)
- Nehemiah prayed and fasted. (Nehemiah 1:4)
- When Daniel was faced with spiritual battles, he prayed and fasted. (Daniel 10:1-2)
- The people of God faced national extinction in the days of Esther the queen. Esther called for her own people to respond with a fast in Esther 4:16. God called His people to pray and fast during a major crisis, and God delivered His people.
- Ezra proclaimed a fast for protection as the people returned to the land following the rebuilding of the walls. God heard, and He answered by giving them protection. (Ezra 8:21)

Note: There are many places in Scripture where we are warned not to fast for the wrong reasons or with the wrong motives.

PREPARATION FOR FASTING

Preparation for a meaningful fast begins with repentance and confession. Do not expect God to violate His own stated will concerning the prayers He can hear. If you have unconfessed sin in your heart, He will not hear you (Psalm 66:18; Isaiah 59:2). The word iniquity, used in the passage in Isaiah, is unconfessed sin. Don't waste your time fasting and praying if you have decided not to confess all known sin to Him. Here are several things you can do to prepare your heart:

- Reflect on God's holiness. (Psalm 111:9; Isaiah 6:3; Isaiah 40:25)
- Ask God to help you make a comprehensive list of your sins.
- Confess every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance and accept God's forgiveness. (1 John 1:9)
- Seek forgiveness from all whom you have offended and forgive all who have hurt you. (Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; Luke 17:3–4)
- Develop dependence on Jesus with total submission and humility. (John 15:5)
- Begin your time of prayer and fasting with an expectant heart. (Hebrews 11:6)
- Do not underestimate spiritual opposition. Satan sometimes intensifies the natural battle between body and spirit. (Galatians 5:16–17)
- Hunger and thirst after righteousness. (Matthew 5:6)

CAN YOU CONFUSE FASTING AND DIETING?

Fasting is not dieting. Though you will experience some physical benefits from fasting, the focus of the fast is on God, not on any benefits that may be derived from the fast. The center of the fast must be God. If anything replaces God as the center of the fast, then we have missed the purpose. Our focus and our attention during a fast must be fixed on God. That is the only way we will be saved from seeking and loving the blessing more than the One who blesses.

HAS THE HOLY SPIRIT CALLED YOU?

Fasting should be a response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and a desire for obedience. It is not to be practiced as a current fad and certainly not to please others or to meet a goal. It will likely come because the Holy Spirit has shown you a specific need that calls for intense, focused, and uninterrupted praying on your part.

Because all fasting must be God-inspired and God-ordained, our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will initiate within us a desire to pray and fast on behalf of all that God is doing and wants to do in our world, our church, and our lives.

WHAT IS YOUR PHYSICAL CONDITION?

There are some people who should not fast (diabetics and those with other health conditions, as advised by a physician). But a healthy person of any age should be able to fast. What we call “hunger” is really appetite. The healthy body can withstand long periods without solid food; however, liquids—water and juices—should be available. There are many excellent resources online and in print that contain information on the physical aspects of fasting.



GUIDELINES FOR FASTING FROM FOOD

- Don't fast when you are sick, traveling, pregnant, or nursing. People with diabetes, gout, liver disease, kidney disease, ulcers, hypoglycemia, cancer, and blood disorders should not fast.
- Don't fast if you are in a hurry and are fasting for immediate results regarding some decision. Fasting is not magic.
- Listen for the nudging from God to fast.
- Stay hydrated. Always drink plenty of water and fluids.
- If you are new to fasting, begin by fasting from one meal. Spend the time with God you would normally by eating.
- Work up to longer fasts. Don't attempt prolonged fasts without guidance. Check with your doctor before attempting longer periods of fasting.
- If you decide to fast regularly, give your body time to adjust to the new rhythms of eating. You may feel more tired on the days you fast. Adjust your responsibilities appropriately. (Expect your tongue to feel coated, and expect to have bad breath.)
- Begin a fast after supper. Fast until supper the next day. This way you miss two, rather than three meals.
- Don't break your fast with a huge meal. Eat small portions of food. The longer you fast, the more you need to break the fast gently.



WHAT KIND OF FAST SHOULD YOU DO?

There is no better time than now, both personally and corporately as a church, to fast on a regular basis. If this is your first time to fast, below are several options that you can consider. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to a decision as to which fast might be best for you to practice.

Option 1—You can choose to fast (abstain from solid food but drink fruit or vegetable juices as well as water) for one day. This could mean you would eat dinner one day, then not eat solid food again until dinner the next day. You would be missing two meals. You could also fast from lunch one day until lunch the next day.

Option 2—You can choose to do a 24-hour fast. This usually does involve some hunger pains or discomfort before the time is up, but the spiritual benefits can be rewarding.

Option 3—Another option is a three-day fast. A three-day fast is an acceptable way for a Christian to demonstrate the seriousness of purpose and depth of commitment that responds to a serious challenge.

Option 4—Longer fasts of a week, two weeks, a month, or 40 days have proven to lift the participant to a very high level of spiritual awareness and responsiveness to God. The longer fasts should generally be undertaken only by those who have first engaged in shorter periods of fasting and have learned how their bodies react to the process of fasting. You may also want to consult with a Christian friend or mentor before attempting a lengthy fast.

Option 5—Consider a “hindrance fast” of the distractions of the world. Following Hebrews 12:1–2, which states we should lay aside that which so easily hinders us, you may want to pick several activities to abstain from, and use that time to seek God. Even good activities can distract us from the best. You can consider a time away from television, social media, leisure reading, sports, shopping, or anything else you find taking up time in your schedule, and use that time in prayer.

If this is your first time to fast, or it has been some time since you last fasted, you are encouraged to start with a shorter time period of fasting. This will give your body an opportunity to adjust to the experience of a fast. Also, if you have never fasted and attempt a two-or-three-day fast and fail to go the whole time without food, you may feel discouraged from attempting another fast. What is important is your motive and dedication to the fast, not how long you fast. Begin with a shorter time period of fasting, then as you become more experienced, you can increase the number of days of your fast.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO ON THE DAY YOU FAST?

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:16-18)

When learning to fast, one of the most important tasks is examining your motivation. In his classic book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard Foster writes:

It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive (Matthew 6:16-18). To use good things to our own ends is always the sign of false religion. How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get God to do what we want.

In order to avoid this trap, it is important to set aside ample time to be alone with the Lord.

Listen for His leading. The more time you spend with Him, the more meaningful your fast will be. A suggested schedule for your day of fasting could be as follows:

MORNING

- Begin your day in prayer.
- Read and meditate on God's Word.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to work in you and to do His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)
- Ask God to use you and show you how to influence your family, your church, your co-workers, and your community.
- Pray to know His vision for your life and for our church.
- Spend the morning outwardly performing the regular duties of your day. Inwardly, you will be in prayer, adoration, song, and worship. Remember and meditate on Colossians 3:17: And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

NOON

- Return to prayer and God's Word.
- Take a short prayer walk.

EVENING

- Seek a quiet place alone with the Lord.
- If others in your Life Group are fasting, you may want to meet together for a time of prayer.
- Avoid television, internet, or any other distraction that may dampen your spiritual focus.

SUGGESTED PRAYER TOPICS

Spend time in intercessory prayer for your church, your city, our nation, and our world. Pray for the leaders of our nation, our Senior Pastor, and our church staff. Pray for our Go Love Tell ministry partners in Birmingham, Maine, Tanzania, Northeast Africa, and Southeast Asia. Pray for the lost and for the Gospel to go forth in every nation. Pray for your family and any special needs.

WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF FASTING?

Fasting allows us to experience God through a more intense and productive prayer life. This is true of the individual and the church. The fast will have no purpose if it is seen as only an interlude in an otherwise worldly-centered lifestyle. It must be a step toward a deeper commitment to know God and His will for our lives. Some results of fasting are:

- Being more attentive to God and the things of God.
- Being more aware of our inadequacies and His adequacy.
- Being changed in ways so we are empowered to change the world.
- God moving powerfully in our lives and in the church in ways that allow Him to show Himself to His people.

When believers prayed and fasted in the Bible, God worked in and through them. For example:

- Answered problems and gave godly wisdom and direction. (Ezra 8:21–23)
- Broke negative mental and emotional habits. (1 Kings 19)
- Brought about healing and wholeness. (Daniel 1:1–21)
- Expanded and increased the witness and testimony for Jesus. (Isaiah 58:6,8; Matthew 5:14–16)
- Provided unusual power and protection. (Esther 4:16)
- Brought revival for the saved and salvation for the unsaved. (1 Samuel 7:2–11)

SPIRITUAL BENEFITS OF FASTING

Fasting will result in God doing something powerful in our lives. God will also do something powerful in the lives of others, in the life of our church, and in our world. Fasting will allow the Spirit of God to take us from our present state of spiritual awareness and responsiveness and lift us to a higher level. A few spiritual benefits of fasting are:

- Keeping company with Jesus in relinquishment of food and other distractions.
- Praying for the needs of the body of Christ.
- Identifying and fellowshiping with Jesus by choosing to follow His sacrificial example.
- Freeing up more time for prayer.
- Repenting of self-indulgent, addictive, or compulsive behaviors.
- Letting these little deprivations remind you of Jesus' great sacrifice on your behalf.
- Seeking strength from God for obedient love and service.





CONCLUSION

All spiritual disciplines require effort and practice, including prayer and fasting. As we continue to learn more and practice more, we trust that God's Spirit will transform our lives. Be aware of God's grace surrounding you and giving you new insights and additional strength.

Our prayer for you is the same prayer that Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus:

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Ephesians 1:18-19a)

RESOURCES

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*.
Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.
Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*.



RESOURCE SUGGESTIONS FROM THE DISCIPLESHIP TEAM:

Parent Cue App

RightNow Media (Resources for all ages—sign up on our website.)

When Children Pray by Shelly Fuller

Praying the Scripture by Jody Berndt

Prayer by Tim Keller



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