

Watching God set people free is a deep passion for Jennifer Barnett. I have had the privilege of watching her lovingly lead people in times of prayer that have resulted in breakthrough moments in their lives. I am thrilled she has poured her heart and experience into *First Freedoms*. I have no doubt all who read this will be inspired and challenged to cultivate a deeper prayer life and walk with Jesus.

Dr. Darren Whitehead, senior pastor, Church of the City, Franklin, TN

There are some books that are meant to be read, and other books that are meant to be absorbed. *First Freedoms* falls in the latter category. It is both inspirational and instructional. It is deeply profound yet wonderfully practical. Whether you are a longtime follower of Jesus hungry to grow your friendship with God, a struggling Christian trying to connect with a God who seems distant, or a curious seeker in search of more, this book is for you. My life, ministry, and church family have been forever shaped and blessed by the realities that Jen puts forth in this book, and I am grateful that blessing is now available to you as well.

Dave Clayton, author of *Revival Starts Here* and pastor at Ethos Church, Nashville, TN

First Freedoms is the book every church leader should be fighting for and knows they need but has never had packaged like this. It's a beautiful thing to watch my friend Jennifer do what Jesus said and unite the church under a banner of freedom. She's doing it one prayer at a time, and every ministry leader needs to work through this book.

Rachel Faulkner Brown, director of Be Still Ministries and Never Alone Widows

In my experiences with both new and experienced Christians over the years, I've witnessed a disturbingly profound disconnect between the heart of the believer and the heart of God, accompanied by a growing despair that there should be so much more. Jennifer Barnett courageously leaps right into the heart of this chasm like an experienced bridge-builder, offering accessible tools to believers that invite them into the very heart of God, one relational step at a time. *First Freedoms* is so much more than a book to be consumed; it is an invitation to every believer, at any stage of their journey, to experience the relational fullness, freedom, and fruitfulness of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Rob Touchstone, director of Business as Mission at Lipscomb University and cofounder of The Well Coffeehouse

I have listened to my dear friend and ministry partner, Jennifer, teach various topics in our Freedom Prayer trainings, and often thought, *Man I wish that was written down somewhere. It's so good!* Well, now it is. And we all are the beneficiaries of her insights and applications. I highly recommend you take your time with *First Freedoms*, both alone and with others. It will be transformational.

Andy Reese, author and president of Freedom Prayer

Every page of this book is worth reading. Each one contributes to unlocking the wonderful freedom that Jesus wants us to experience. I would consider its principles to be one of the main reasons CrossBridge is such an emotionally healthy and spiritually powerful church. This book is full of hope!

Kirk Freeman, lead pastor of CrossBridge Community Church,
San Antonio, TX

Working in a crisis center, I hear an amplification of our culture's question: Where is hope for freedom from wounds and lies and sin and all the outworkings of evil that wreck our lives and the lives around us? Far from trying to find this hope in ourselves, our own insights, and our own behavior modification, *First Freedoms* offers a refreshing guide to the practices of Jesus that open us up to intimacy with God so he can bring about real freedom. The pages of this book throw open wide the door to hope and offer an attunement to hear the voice of the One who beckons us to enter.

Adam Graham, LPC and MHSP,
director of emergency psychiatric services

JENNIFER BARNETT

FIRST FREEDOMS

*Drawing Near to God by Cultivating a
Wholehearted Prayer Life*



Nashville, Tennessee



First Freedoms: Drawing Near to God by Cultivating a Wholehearted Prayer Life
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PART 1

THE CONNECTION

In order to cultivate a wholehearted prayer life, we must be connected to God. Most of us know we should be in close relationship with him, but we never received practical steps on how to actually draw near. Yet once we take those first steps to connect to God, we can stay connected and grow in our relationship with him. In Part 1, we will explore the biblical concepts of wholeheartedly drawing near to God as Father, abiding with him, and securing our connection to him through a healthy prayer life.

COMMUNION WITH GOD

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

— Psalm 139:23–24

The language in Psalm 139:23–24 has always challenged me and simultaneously beckoned me toward more. It is poetic and beautiful, this idea of God searching and knowing a person’s heart, but it is also active and participatory. As I read it, I’m humbled to recognize that the God of the universe has a vested interest in my heart—and in removing from me what is anxious and offensive that clouds my vision. He wants to be near me. He wants my heart to be whole. Despite my blemishes, God wants to lead me in the way everlasting. There is hope for me, and God is close to me in the process.

As you begin the exercises of this study, allow me to share an important assumption of mine, and know that I share this assumption in order to help you feel secure during your pursuit of first freedoms: I assume that you, as a participant in this study, believe you were made for a relationship with God. As part of a complete relationship with him, I also assume you believe you were made to talk to him through prayer and that you believe God communicates back to us as we pray.

Simply said, I assume that you believe on some level you can truly connect with God through prayer, by which we speak to God and he speaks to us. I assume that on some level, you long for a wholehearted prayer life, where you can draw near to God and where you hide nothing before him. That God

would have access to every part of your heart, your story, and your history, and that you would trust him with all of it. That you could talk to him, and that he would respond in a way that you understand. Prayer is essentially a conversation with God, and God is not a passive participant in the conversation. So even if you have never experienced God speaking to you, I write with the assumption that you believe and hope for this kind of conversation in prayer.

If you feel that you lack personal experience with this type of communion with God or that you are a bit shaky in your faith in this regard, let me assure you that these are common barriers for those who pursue these freedoms. I find the Lord is generally quick to respond to our desperation and desire. Our spiritual résumés, even though seemingly lacking, are inconsequential to God, who sees our hearts and knows what we need. Communion with God in prayer involves hearing from God and seeing God as we wait for his response. Once we encounter his voice, it is our responsibility to respond back.

HEARING GOD

My belief that Christians can hear from God is rooted in Scripture passages about God's character and desire for relationship. While I know some people believe God no longer speaks to us, I find the argument for that belief to be based on false understandings of Scripture passages and in great contradiction to God's heart for communion with his children. When we observe the way Jesus responded to people in relationship, we gain insight into God's response to us in prayer. Healthy relationships are two-sided, and communication is vital to their health.

Prayer is a primary means of God's grace to help us encounter the Lord.

In the Garden, we find God walking and talking with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). Throughout the Scriptures, God is with his children—guiding, reproofing, and restoring them back to himself. It would be out of character for him as a living and active God to just stop what he has been doing from the beginning. The prophet Jeremiah speaks God's words: "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know"

(Jer. 33:3). God’s heart continually seeks to help us grow in communication with him as we depend on him for knowledge and revelation.

In John 10, Jesus says his sheep hear his voice, know it, and follow him. In the context of that passage, it is not only essential to their relationship for the sheep to hear the shepherd but also crucial for the sheep’s survival and protection from thieves, liars, wolves—and ultimately from the enemy. Knowing what the Lord’s voice sounds like is a non-negotiable for followers of the Good Shepherd. In 1 John 1:3, we read a similar emphasis on not just hearing God, but having fellowship with him: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” We have fellowship with God, and by definition, that fellowship is active and happens in the context of a community of people with similar interests and experiences. It would be nearly impossible to have fellowship with another Christian without communion or conversation with them. Like those relationships, our fellowship with God must be ongoing and in the process of continual growth, which requires us to hear from God. On some level, we must be familiar with the voice of God, with spiritual ears tuned to hear him in how he speaks and instructs.

*God is not
a passive
participant
in prayer.*

SEEING GOD

“Seeing God” is another way to describe our experiences with him. Scripture often uses sensory language for this. I believe God understands both our human weakness and our struggle to communicate personally, especially with someone we cannot fully see. Some argue that we cannot “see” God, using passages such as Exodus 33:20, where God says, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” But we must take into account that Greek and Hebrew words for “see” in the Bible carry some pretty broad meanings. Here are five to consider.

We can see with the physical eye (*blepōæ* in Greek), but we can also see or “behold in a vision” (*ἰδω* in Hebrew); we can “take heed” and perceive with the mind inwardly (*horaōæ* in Greek), and we can metaphorically see by knowing with the mind (*eidon* in Greek). Then we can consider, discern, or gaze upon God (*r’h* in Hebrew). So while on this side of eternity we cannot *physically* see God, we can “see” him in other ways as these other definitions reveal.

If we could not, why would the psalmist instruct us to, “Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always” (Ps. 105:4)? Or what would be the point of 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people, who are called by name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land”? Further, Paul says we see God by continually beholding the Lord’s glory as we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18).

While we cannot see God in all of his splendor with our physical eyes, he has equipped us with senses and a mind to encounter him. In fact, he wants to own and have access to those “screens” in our mind that are rightfully his, such as the places where our minds can be impressed by a thought, where we can create new ideas, and where we can recall moments from our past. This is what Paul is getting at in Ephesians 1:18: “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.” God made us to see him with spiritual eyes and to encounter him in ways that run deeper and truer than what we can physically see.

SENSING GOD

Take stock for a moment of the vast amounts of useless or even life-draining thoughts that float through your “mind’s eye”—that space in your mind where you can close your eyes and picture people, places, and interactions. Get to the mental place where you can think about something in the past, such as what you ate for lunch or what you imagine this afternoon will look like in traffic driving home. Consider how all of those faculties—what we think, see, hear, smell, imagine, and feel—are bombarded daily by social media, television, technology, and entertainment. Even worse, consider how we can be bombarded by our own self-promoting and greedy imaginations!

Consider now how God wants to fill the very senses he created. As believers, we have been given “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), with the eyes of our heart made to encounter him. This is not just strictly a cognitive knowledge-based encounter, but a wholehearted one through which we can both see him and hear him with our spiritual eyes and ears. Communion is not just knowing *about him* but *knowing him fully*. If that were not so, his Word would not instruct us to wait on him, seek his face, and know his voice. Since

communion is a goal in our relationship with God, then, logically, he wants us to use our minds and senses, which he created, to help us encounter him. Scripture uses sensory words so we can know him fully—not just intellectually but on every level.

If God did not want to commune with us on a sensory level, he would not have used parables and pictures to offer truths. But he did through Jesus. A picture communicates depth and layers that words cannot, and when we read Jesus' parables, we typically can see them in our minds in ways that are personal to us. I have asked many people to "picture" Psalm 23 in prayer, and hearing people describe their variety of responses is beautiful. That psalm shows up on that screen in their mind that can create and imagine, and it is often deeply personal and specific to their life. Thus, God knows how to relay information in ways we can understand by what we see and feel. His messages are personal and often "speak our language," using those screens in our mind to communicate.

Consider another example of a sensory-level approach to experiencing God. Matthew 7:7–8 depicts God's heart for how he wants us to seek him: by knocking on a door that "will be opened." This is not a literal door but a figure of speech. This picture helps us understand who he is, even though our physical eyes don't see a literal door. Our spiritual eyes can more easily understand his promises when they're framed in terms of something relatable. I challenge anyone to read this Scripture without seeing a door in their mind's eye. You can't help but see it!

Often people even see where they are in relationship to that door or where God is or his countenance in response to our knocking. God uses that mental picture to help us fully take in this message about his desire to commune with us. And what kind of God would describe this opening door only to mislead us? He wouldn't give us an image like this to trick us or disappoint us. That would counter the very nature of God in Scripture. He wants to reveal himself, and our response to what he reveals usually demonstrates where we are in relationship with him.

Elsewhere in the Scriptures, God describes himself as a shade from heat, a refuge, and a stronghold. He is the Rock, Banner, and Shield. The metaphors and names used to describe his nature are endless, and they help us encounter him. Jesus was a carpenter by trade, but people more often think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Why? Because we find something very

inviting about this part of his personality. We can picture a shepherd, and we know that good shepherds tend to their flock and keep them safe. The picture reveals something in God's character that we long for. We can see it and understand.

The many pictures God uses in Scripture to engage our mind's eye prove that he intended for us to use our imaginations to encounter him. For at least this *First Freedoms* study, I hope you are open to the fact that God may want to use the very senses and faculties he created to usher in encounters with him in your prayer life, even if praying in this way is new to you. I know that I want nothing to be off-limits to God in my heart and mind when I go to him in prayer, and I hope you want that too. That way he can have access to the places in our minds where we create, remember, are impressed by, and have an emotional response to him in order to speak to us fully.

We must be open to this communion and allow him to communicate with full access to our hearts and minds in whichever way he pleases. We cannot have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16) if we only encounter him with just a portion of what he created. We give him permission to communicate, with access to every part and a desire for him to fill it. We find him when we give him full ownership of every place in our heart (Jer. 29:13). That's what a whole-hearted prayer life looks like.

SEEKING SAFE COMMUNION WITH GOD

When we acknowledge that the Lord wants to communicate with us as we pray, then looking at parameters in communion with God is an important next step. Even in our weaknesses, God intends for us to communicate back with him. Of course, God is trustworthy and perfect, but we are flawed and can mishear him at times. Therefore, knowing the boundaries of interacting with God is important. We can hold to these parameters as safe and biblical boundaries as we learn to encounter him more. They give guideposts and offer plenty of grace in the process of growing in prayer, and they also stand as clear markers to know what is and isn't of God.

1. *His voice aligns with his Word.* God will not say, do, or reveal anything contrary to his Word. Whatever we hear in his still small voice or sense in his presence or even see in our mind's eye—it must

line up with his Word, his character, and his nature to be verified as his voice. Scripture is the manual that depicts who God is, and for him to depart from it would run counter to his holiness. His ways are unchanging, and the Bible gives truths for us to recognize those ways. What we sense from God as we pray will match who he is in Scripture.

2. We can grow in discerning his voice. We are human, which means we are not perfect, and we are capable of misinterpretation, as I mentioned. There is a biblical precedent for discerning the voice of God in the dialogue between a young Samuel and his mentor, Eli. Samuel responded to Eli, believing that Eli had called him, when in fact God had called him (1 Sam. 3). After Samuel mistook the voice of God three times, Eli told him to respond by saying, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (v. 9). How encouraging to know we can grow in our discernment of his voice even after missing it! Samuel gave a precedent for the process (success and failure) of knowing God’s voice.

3. We must reject other voices in prayer. We, like Jesus, can encounter three voices as we pray: our voice, God’s voice, and the enemy’s voice. Consider Jesus in the wilderness as he encountered the devil twisting truths using Scripture. Or in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus stated, “Not my will, but yours” (Luke 22:42). Or the countless times he simply heard what the Father said, and then obeyed. He was aware of the conflict in what he heard and could discern the source of each voice.

Knowing these three important parameters of prayer is crucial, and they point to why I’m such a big fan of praying in groups of two or three, especially for those learning to hear God for the first time. Praying with others like this is also important for those waiting on God for help in a weighty or confusing matter. We can go forth in prayer this way with full faith that God made us to be led by the Spirit and he also made us to be open-handed—because on our own we can more easily miss God’s voice and mess it up too. There is grace as we learn and fine-tune our spiritual ears and eyes, but how helpful it is to learn with mentors and friends who encourage us along the way! The early believers set a precedent in Acts for corporately “[devoting] themselves” (2:42) to prayer, and like every other spiritual discipline, it is sometimes easier to learn with friends.

Communion with anyone involves sharing intimate thoughts and feelings, and genuine prayer is the ultimate example of communion with God. God created us to glorify him and enjoy him, and there's no better way to glorify him and enjoy him than by encountering him through prayer. We glorify him fully when we look to him to fill our need to know him and to be known by him—that we would in him alone be satisfied. Many Christians walk around feeling dismal because they do not experience this gift of delightful communion for which they were made.

We tend to approach God with our sin and our worries without spending much time waiting on him and simply enjoying him. Our personal devotion can often lack worship and space for our eyes to be fixed on Jesus for no other reason than to marvel at his glory. There is no greater joy than to know him and be known by him in prayer, when our spirit is delighted to hear his voice, sense his presence, and see with the eyes of our heart what he offers to us in our deep need to enjoy him.

When our prayer lives feel dismal and without his glory, we often abandon the storehouse available to us in communion with God. We do this out of fear or guilt, often because we believe multiple lies swirling in our heads about how God works and who we are. So we retreat, believing that the grace to grow in prayer does not apply *to us*.

But grace *does* apply to us, and we need him to teach us this truth. We are most fulfilled when we seek and find him. The challenge often, though, is we just don't know practically *how* to seek and find him. In the pages that follow, you will have an opportunity to learn how to do so in drawing near to God.

In each chapter of this book, I offer prompts to help you grow in your prayer life. These come in two sections called “Personal Prayer” and “Community Connection.” Each of these sections contains questions and prompts, which move in a specific order and help you progress through the main concepts in each chapter. Take as much time as you need with each question, and I encourage you to revisit them throughout the study as you build your capacity to pray. You can return to these on a regular basis in your own time with the Lord. The Personal Prayer section is for you to work through on your own, and the Community Connection section gives you a way to discuss the chapter within a group setting.

PERSONAL PRAYER

As you begin your first Personal Prayer section in this chapter, I recommend you work through each prompt in order and pause after each one, not only to think about each specific prayer point or action, but more importantly to ask the Lord for his response as you seek him. It is normal and very possible that you may not receive a response from him on every question, but you are building your capacity to be still and wait on him. It has been my experience that he often has much more to communicate than we give him time to. Our waiting is good, no matter the outcome. I suggest spending enough time on each number to grasp the concept and really wait on the Lord for a response before you proceed to the next one.

For most people, the Personal Prayer section each week can be completed in one sitting, but it can take multiple sittings over a few days or even a week if you need more time. Whatever amount of time you spend, I recommend you return to the questions and steps and practice multiple times so that it becomes a part of your daily prayer routine with God. The pace is up to you, but it is most important to learn these foundational practices so you can easily return to them again and again in prayer.

1. Before you begin a conversation with God today, take some intentional time to get comfortable with giving him access to your heart and mind by making sure the screens that you encounter him with are active and accessible. Resist the urge, for a moment, to be overly spiritual in this activity, and just close your eyes and picture something to drink. Record in as much detail as you can what you see, describing every part of the scene in your mind.

2. It is likely that you “saw” a very specific drink in a very specific container, possibly free-floating in the air or sitting on a known table in your home. Now read Psalm 23:1–3 and close your eyes. Picture the images of this psalm on the same screen in your mind, inviting the Lord to meet you in it. See the invitation in these verses, feel it, and listen to God. Again, when you are ready, record in as much detail as possible whatever you might have seen, felt, and heard.

3. You likely not only saw in your mind’s eye the visuals of Psalm 23 but had an emotional response to it as well. Similar to remembering a treasured birthday party that you loved, you not only saw the image but sensed it and had a response to it emotionally too.

Now close your eyes again in a posture of prayer and ask the Lord if he will allow you to recall a recent situation in your life where you needed to let him restore your soul but you did not go to him. Take stock of how that situation made you feel by simply applying his truth to it using Psalm 23:1–3. Ask the Lord to show you or give you a sense of what it would look like to allow him access to this situation in a place of “leading you beside still waters” and “restoring your soul.”

Give yourself some time to see it, feel it, and sense it, listening and waiting for whatever he wants to reveal. Record any details that you

sense as you wait on him, knowing that it's okay not to receive great detail—there is peace in the simple and obedient act of waiting on him. We will learn in the weeks to come practical tools to help you see and hear him more.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

As you begin the Community Connection section here and in each chapter, the goal is to connect with both God and the others in your group. While some discussion is necessary, prioritize time to pray for one another in each meeting. Select a group leader or facilitator if one is not already in place.

In some group meetings, it may be helpful to wait on the Lord in a place of intercession as the group facilitator or leader responds to one or two people to help them inquire of the Lord for further wisdom or places of freedom. You are never a bystander, but part of an intercessory community. If the leader is helping a group member navigate through something in the prompts, begin to silently pray as they assist them. The group leader can also pray out loud if a question requires the group to inquire of the Lord. The other group members can listen quietly, and then share as directed by the leader.

There is freedom for the group to navigate this section based on the group needs or specific areas of interest or inquiry. Ideally in each meeting everyone will participate by sharing, praying, interceding, or exhorting. Each participant should resist the urge to give advice but instead focus on praying and asking the Lord to bring wisdom and counsel. If possible, allow time for every group member to participate at least once in answering a question or praying. Your group's connection with God will only bring greater connection with one another.

1. Begin by sharing with your group your personal responses to seeing as you read Psalm 23 in the Personal Prayer section. Take notice of how the same passage of Scripture can play out on the screen of the mind so differently from person to person, yet still remain so unwaveringly true. How did God show his personal understanding of each person in what he revealed?
2. Knowing that relationship with God is both intimate and personal, and that he has access to our faculties that he created for communion, discuss the pitfalls of quickly reading Scripture without inviting the Lord to meet you as you read his Word. When our time in Scripture is purely cognitive, which easily happens in fast reading, we do not allow him to access the other places that he created in us. What do we miss? How does this affect our concept of prayer?
3. As a group, define what the three voices mentioned in this chapter sound like: the voice of God, the voice of the enemy, and your own will. How do you determine which one is speaking, so you can know how to respond to it?
4. Conclude your group time by praying for one another in the area of growing in greater ability to see and hear God. Pray for specific requests or concerns for each member, such as, “I’m not able to hear him,” or, “My imagination is so active. I’m scared to give him access to that part of my mind.” Declare as a group your desire that he grow you in your ability to encounter him.

It is freeing and a bit daunting to really ask God to open the eyes of your heart and your spiritual ears to know him more. You can declare that you were made to commune with him, and that you desire to know him fully. Nothing is off-limits when it comes to allowing God to search your heart. You can trust God to meet you in your hunger to know him in greater measure, just as he intended.

UNDERSTANDING GOD AS FATHER

This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

— Matthew 6:9

I have the profound privilege of being mother to four amazing children. Raising them and watching them grow is the greatest gift. Our youngest of two daughters is a beautiful, spunky warrior princess from China. I will forever have etched in my mind and on my heart the day we officially signed the papers so she could legally become a member of our family.

In November of 2012, we went to China to bring home our new daughter. Upstairs in a dusty government office, smack in the middle of China, we watched a surreal transaction unfold as we signed papers and converted American dollars to the Chinese yen.

As this process took place, our two oldest children played on the floor with their new baby sister, who had only been with us for less than twenty-four hours at that point. We felt like she was already one of our own. She was a tiny seventeen-month-old girl, and I watched with amusement as she crawled on the ground “playing tiger” with her big sister—both growling loudly as the official business of the adoption proceeded. The process concluded, and I gathered coats across the room. Then the orphanage director walked out of the office, turned around, and called my new daughter by her Chinese nickname, beckoning her to come say goodbye.

I can honestly tell you that time froze for me in that moment. I stood across the room from the director, bundling up my two older children in their coats, while our new daughter played at my husband's feet. There she was, my baby girl standing next to her brand-new daddy as the director called her by name. A fierce protection rose up in the pit of my stomach as I secretly, internally threatened this woman, *Do NOT call my daughter!* I had enough adoption education to know that this director, even though she likely meant well, was not helping the attachment process, nor was she diminishing the trauma and confusion of the moment by beckoning her to come hug her goodbye.

In those frozen moments, our sweet baby girl looked at her and looked at her new daddy. Then she wrapped her little arms tightly around her new daddy's leg, as if to say, *I choose him.*

If I could have yelled in joyful victory, I would have. Instead, I caught my husband's eye, and we invisibly high-fived across the room, rejoicing in her initial acceptance of us. She already knew—in less than twenty-four hours—that clinging to her new daddy, who was essentially a stranger to her, was already somehow better than anything she had ever known. This new daddy had just signed on the dotted line, paid the price to bring her home with us, and adopted her in every sense of the word—legally, emotionally, and spiritually. I would have *hated* to see what would have happened if that director had tried to approach her and remove her grasp from my husband's leg. Our heart to protect her and love her fiercely had already set in, and she was fully a part of our family.

SPIRITUAL ORPHANS

As followers of Jesus, many of us can relate to her experience of the hallmark day when we became a part of the family of God. Most of us can point to the day of our adoption into Christ, when we made the decision to receive Christ as Lord. That date might be written in our Bible; maybe we made the decision at church camp or walked the aisle one Sunday; or perhaps it was in college with the help of a mentor or in a Bible study during adulthood. Regardless of how it happened, we can point to our baptism, our signing a church membership book, or the invitation we felt when God beckoned our heart to him.

How tragic, though, if all we ever know of our adoption is the date it happened.

If we only experienced a transaction with God when we officially became a Christian, we would have no relationship with him. Can you imagine the damage on my daughter's heart if she knew only of the day she was adopted and legally ours but nothing beyond that? Can you imagine our heartache if she knew only the initial attachment of grasping her new father's leg as she chose him—and that was it? If she had never heard his silly songs about her, or never knew the exhilaration of being whisked up on his shoulders so she could see the world? What would her life have been like if she never knew how he kissed her cheeks and how she would giggle uncontrollably as they played peek-a-boo? Or how he would sneak her candy, or how he told her she was beautiful? How he still does?

Adoption research says if we had never attached in close relationship to her or cultivated a connection with her, she would have lived in our home yet still would have felt orphaned. Yes, she would have legally been in our family, but she would have felt like an outsider. How tragic that would have been. How tragic it is for Christians who don't have a close relationship with God, just a date that secures eternity and a Christianity void of connection.

Perhaps this describes you. You recall the day of your salvation but struggle to connect with God. You know you should get close to him and secretly long for more but are unsure how to get there. Maybe you feel very far off from the promises of God, and his "good fatherhood" seems out of reach. You believe he is good in theory but think his goodness applies to everyone but you. But the good news is that when you realize how the messages of the world and your experiences impact your thoughts and feelings about God, you can allow God to define correctly how he wants relationship with you to look. And your capacity to know him can grow and build.

Those first few months home with our new daughter, I did everything possible to build our connection. She was traumatized and did not have a grid for what a mother and father should look like. We had to build it. I used finger puppets and songs, along with full-out Broadway musicals just to help her make eye contact and keep it. Connection was foreign to her, but I was determined to

make it. And if I, being evil, know how to give good gifts to my child, *how much more* does our good Father God want his children to attach to him (Matt. 7:11)?

KNOWING GOD AS FATHER

Many of us have known good and bad parents, even if not our own. We've known good and bad churches, good and bad teachers, and good and bad mentors. Often, how our earthly parents raised us determines from a very young age our preconceptions of God as Father and how he feels about us. Sometimes, however, these notions simply do not line up with Scripture. God knew we would encounter roadblocks created by our earthly families that could derail a right and true relationship with him, so he gave us the capacity through prayer to continue to grow in our ability to attach to him, even into adulthood. Our heart can expand in love toward this good Father whom we long to know.

From the beginning, God's heart was about relationship. Of all of his glorious names, he prefers to be called "Father" in prayer. References to God as Father flood the Scriptures, and Jesus ultimately demonstrated this relationship in his instructions on prayer in Matthew 6:6–9: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." These are Jesus' absolute instructions on how to pray, and he chose to approach almighty God in prayer with *Father*. He bids us to do the same.

I'm sure that rattled the religious leaders of the day, who were fueled by a hierarchy of rules and regulations; hearing the ease with which Jesus spoke to the Father offended the structure they shakily stood upon. This relationship into which Jesus invites us and the truth of God's fatherhood should permeate our hearts and cause us to run to his open arms with a longing to be near to him. Only the Lord, our God, wants that intimate relationship with sons and daughters. He is Majestic Creator God, and he is at the same time, our most holy parent. In Exodus 4:22, we see this when God instructed Moses to tell Pharaoh, "This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son."

In Deuteronomy 1:29–31, God continued to define his identity as Father in this manner when Moses reminded the people:

■ The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the wilderness.

There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.

If we're honest, we often forget the provision of a perfect Father, like the Israelites did, and with grumbling forge our own way. We too are often rattled, like the religious leaders were, at the concept of nearness to God as Father in the secret places of prayer. Surely, we have to do something to earn that access. Can it really be that good? That true?

That the Most Holy God beckons us to call him Father and respond from that truth—we can barely wrap our minds around that reality of relationship and often struggle to get close to that level of intimacy with him. We were made to access the place in prayer where we don't just have knowledge of him as Father, but a knowing of him that comes from nearness. We know in our heads that the invitation of God as Father is true, but we wrestle to access that truth in our hearts. In theory we believe God is a good Father, at least in part, but our own life experiences haven't prepared us for that reality. We don't have a true standard of measurement for it, and we often fear the reality of his fatherhood exists for everyone but us. *He is Father, we think, but not for me.*

DISTORTIONS OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

Many Christians have an idea of God as Father that doesn't line up fully with God's full offer of that truth. There are distortions of God's identity as Father, some very damaging and some very subtle. For most of us, though, the root of our distortion of God's identity is a combination of attributing characteristics of our earthly fathers to our heavenly Father. We naturally assume they operate in the same way. These can be massive untruths that keep us distant from communion, or really small lies we believe because of how we were raised. It is part of our fallen human nature to do this.

Think of distortions like this: If you have one slow worker at the DMV, you assume they are all that way. This becomes your personal truth, whether or not it is really true. Yet I've had several DMV workers who were kind, efficient, and enormously helpful. Just because you experience one inefficient DMV employee, it doesn't mean they all are. But we are quick to project our experience with one on the group.

In a similar way, just because you experience distortions with the role of a father, it doesn't mean that God works in the same manner. In fact, he is so much better, so much more perfect in that role, than any mere human can be. He defined the role from the beginning. If we don't know him as the ultimate display of provision, protector, and provider from a place of close proximity, we will depend on our earthly representations of fatherhood to define the role. And even the best earthly fathers are flawed. So we are left with a lesser understanding of God the Father and walk away with false assumptions. We must let *him* define what his fatherhood looks like truly from the context of relationship. He has to become the grid by which we measure all other representations of "father," not the other way around.

We sometimes decide God must be like our earthly father because that is our natural paradigm. It's all we know, and it becomes our truth. Some of us have other earthly male influences—good, bad, and everything in between—and our experience with them becomes our standard measurement for how God responds to us as Father. For others, their church upbringing subtly (or not so subtly) influences how they think and feel about Father God for good or often not so good. We must take our preconceived notions before the true Father God and ask him to show us how those lies or misconceptions arrived there. Then we can ask for a true and right picture of who he really is as Father. This will help us to know him as he really is.

MEETING HIM IN THE INNER ROOM

Despite our insecurities and misconceptions, we can still hear the instructions from Jesus, "Pray to your Father" (Matt. 6:6). He adds in that same verse, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door." In the middle of this directive we see a sacred truth about the secret place of meeting God: when we pray to our Father, we go not only into our *physical* inner room and close the door to pray but also the *figurative* inner room of our hearts.

I'm a fan of interpreting the "go into your room" part of the verse both figuratively and literally. The people who matter most in my life get my time, intentionally and with my full presence. When we're together, I close out the world and steal away with them, and my attention is locked on that relationship. Sometimes, with the intimate relationships in my life, we will go

someplace away from it all and leave behind every other distraction. I carve out time to build those relationships, without which I am incomplete.

This is true of my relationship with my husband, my children, my extended family members, and my close friends. Sometimes we retreat or go on vacation, but often, I spend intentional time during everyday life fixed on them without distraction. In these times, we put our phones away, turn off our computers, and sometimes even postpone our chores. I invest in these kinds of intentional moments because I love my people, and I know our relationships will not reach their full potential without these times of purposeful experience of one another. Those relationships will not thrive without time together.

In the same way, we as children of God must steal away to the inner room of our hearts to meet with our heavenly Father. Ideally, we can find a secluded place in our home for this, but even a bathroom or a closet will suffice! Once we cultivate relationship in that inner room of our hearts, we can return to it again and again. When we regularly practice this habit, the inner room of our hearts can flourish with the Father, even when we're outside of the literal secret meeting space.

RECEIVING HIS REWARD IN PRAYER

Jesus promised that when we pray, our “Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward [us]” (Matt. 6:6). The progression goes like this: we go to our inner room to pray to our Father, and he sees us and rewards us. We have the security of knowing how God truly sees us in this place—something that we all long for. When our Father sees us, he responds by rewarding us.

That reward of God is far better than we can imagine. The Greek word for “reward” in Matthew 6:6 carries several closely related meanings, such as “to compensate,” “to reward for a loss or harm,” “to give back,” “to deliver,” or “to return or restore.”¹ All of the meanings of the word “reward” point to something far deeper than what we often get through a cursory reading. This word has a long-established precedent in Scripture and often relates to issues of justice.

The Old Testament understanding was that if harm was done to another person, the guilty party not only had to pay injury for injury but also ensure the wounded was healed and restored (Exod. 21:18–19). Psalm 18:20–21 shows

*God is not
a passive
participant
in prayer.*

the reward for keeping the ways of God with clean hands and not turning away from him. This idea of legal recompense can have a negative connotation, but remember, the Father we go to in prayer is the same one who “[prepares] a table . . . in the presence of [our] enemies” (Ps. 23:5). If we believe our reward for showing up to the secret place with God is based on our performance, then we miss it. Our posture with God in prayer should not be, “Look what I’ve done!” but, “Look at what I need.”

Our acknowledgment that without him we desperately lack what we need prompts God to offer us a restorative reward that fills up empty places in our hearts, pays off a debt, and ultimately delivers what we lack. He lets us sit securely as he sets the table, prepares the food, and anoints our head. Our cup overflows as we receive abundance and nearness despite deserving eternal separation. We deserve recompense for every sin, but we’re met by a good Father who has secured through Jesus that we owe nothing. We find restoration, reward, and repayment for loss because Jesus gave us access to draw near to the Father. This is truly good news!

Nestled right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, these instructions about prayer in Matthew 6:6 show us how God accomplishes what Jesus promised in the context of the sermon: he responds to our prayers to fill the one who is hungry or thirsty, bless the poor in spirit, and comfort the one who mourns (Matt. 5:3–6). When we come to him aware of our need, his response is to reward.

When was the last time you chose to steal away from the world and encounter your Father? When have you recently walked away from prayer with compensation for loss, deliverance, and restoration? Many of us don’t come close to experiencing God in prayer like this. Yet this is our instruction for—and promise in—prayer. We can barely survive spiritually on quick utterances that we launch haphazardly to the heavens.

Contrast this with Jesus’ teaching on prayer, which describes a relationship through which we receive what we need to fill a void. We should leave the prayer closet changed, restored, and seen by God. We should feel the grace of the reward that fills up the empty places and exchanges our losses for something we long for.

What would it look like in our hearts, our families, our churches, and our cities if we walked in these truths?

If we walked as children of God, filled and not depleted? If we met consistently and intimately with our good Father? We would not only walk by the Spirit but also be an aroma to the world as connected sons and daughters of God (Gal. 5:25). We would get our very life from prayer with the Father in the inner room, and everything we do would be fueled by that life. The work of our hands, the words of our lips, and the very steps of our feet would be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led because we had encountered the Father. Success in all other spiritual disciplines and activities in the Christian life comes from this place of being known, seen, and restored by the Father.

PERSONAL PRAYER

1. Begin your time in prayer today by sharing with God your honest assessment of your attachment to him. Consider the adoption story in this chapter as your starting point. Do you find it difficult to wait on him? Do you struggle to make spiritual eye contact with him and stay connected to him throughout the day? Do you trust him? Do you want to be near, or are you more comfortable at a distance? Share your honest thoughts as it concerns connection to him. Don't filter them—he knows your heart even when you hide. Saying them honestly invites him into the conversation and opens the door for further growth in your relationship.

2. Consider your expectations as you approach God today in prayer. Do you expect the reward offered in Matthew 6:6, or do you somehow expect disapproval and rejection? Allow yourself to receive the truth that when you approach him in prayer, he repays, restores, and rewards you in your places of need. It is not his heart to respond otherwise. Once you've allowed yourself time to reflect on this truth, confess to him where you have struggled with the promise of his response and expected something different.

3. Reflect on your earthly father and other paternal role models you've had in your life, such as teachers, coaches, pastors, and supervisors. In what ways do they reflect a true example of the heart of Father God? Are there some characteristics that distort the image of God? Ask God to show you where your impression of him may have been skewed by these earthly relationships. Remember, it's not about blame or judgment but about recognizing that the reality of his perfect fatherhood can often be twisted by these very impactful earthly representations. Ask him for his clarity and insight so you may be able to see him rightly.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

1. Begin your group time today by allowing each member to share what benefits they have not accessed or sought after as an adopted son or daughter of God. For example, you might name some birthrights as an adopted child of God that you know are true but you have not accepted as your own, either because you feel they are out of reach or you aren't worthy of them. You could name things like, "I know God is good, but his goodness seems to elude me," or, "I know Scripture says I can get near to him, but that honestly sounds scary and overwhelming."
2. Share with the group one area of attachment to God in which you feel strong and secure, and one area in which you want to seek growth. For example, "I feel attached and secure in the area of trusting God, but I want to grow in my ability to just rest in his presence. I always feel I need to do something for him instead of just being still before him."
3. Take turns discussing specific areas where earthly fathers or father figures could have influenced your ideas about the fatherhood of God. These examples can be both positive and negative, such as, "Because my father picked me up every day after school and asked me a million questions about my day, I believe that God is interested in the small details of my life." Or it could be something like, "Because my dad was absent most nights of the week due to work, I believe God provides for my needs but isn't emotionally invested in my heart."
4. Be sure to conclude by praying for one another in the areas of need and where you feel a void in your identity as a son or daughter of God and in relationship with him as Father. Remember, God does not place a hunger for more of him if he doesn't intend to fill it. Pray from a place of confidence that you were made to walk as sons and daughters in right relationship with him.

You can stake a claim on knowing your truest identity as a child of God, who is the most perfect Father. Despite distortions that you've experienced, you can simply acknowledge them and attach yourself to the reality of God as Father. He knows the longing that you have for communion and he will be faithful to fill the void in your heart if you let him. He is good and his mercies endure forever.