

# Prayer Guide

## REFLECTIONS ON JOURNEYING IN THE SECOND HALF: MY EXPERIENCE

**“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”** Ps. 90:12

In the “second half” of my life I began to “number my days”—to recognize and take into account that my days are “numbered,” limited, and that I must think of moving towards the end of my life, and living with increasing limitations and change. In some ways we may still be “on the ascent,” but we also begin the “descent.” I can see this double movement in retrospect. Many bear witness to the fact that in this time of “descent,” of limitations, of loss and pain, the most significant spiritual growth may occur. Richard Rohr, who often speaks on a spirituality for the second half of life, says, “Our spirituality is all about what we do with our pain. We either transmit it or are transformed by it.” As Paul says, in the experience of the “outwardly wasting away,” we can also experience “inwardly being renewed day by day.” (2 Co 3:16) Significantly, it is in 2 Co, written probably when Paul was in his early 50’s, that Paul experiences and faces his “weakness” as a position or condition in which Christ wants him to discover and learn more of the sufficiency of His grace. Paul often refers to the reality of his “weakness”, limitations, hardships and sacrifices, as the opportunities and occasions for him to know more of the grace of Christ, and for the life of Christ to be revealed in his mortal body. He can say, ““But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Co 4:7)

In my own experience, the second half has proven to be a time of major, deep change. More large paradigm shifts have taken place. In a study of my life’s journey, I discovered that out of 9 major paradigm shifts, 7 took place after 45! A different ministry focus and ensuing job change led to explore new paths. Personal needs that I became aware of in increasing existential self-knowledge forced more hidden motivations to surface, and confronted deeper patterns of resistance to God’s love and grace. Change was much more and a lot harder than I had previously thought. Simple honesty after many years as a committed Christian forced me to that conclusion! I had to face some major failures, and disappointments in my ministry. Things were not all working out like I had imagined or expected. Some dreams were lost, and no new ones replaced them. The spiritual disciplines I had practiced until then seemed inoperative and dry to bring change and renewal. Life stage issues that I went through—moving into middle age and beyond, moving beyond active parenting, loss of parents--- pushed me to look for new ways to meet God and open my life more to his grace. Most of these insights and self-awareness raised new and painful questions. I became much more aware of my “time line” and its implications.

Help came from unexpected sources, made available by God’s grace. I began to move outside of my traditional evangelical stream of spirituality. This half became a time of learning and receiving from more of the six major streams of the river of Christian spirituality. My primary stream seemed not to lead me much further. I did not want to abandon it, but felt stuck. These changes, these paradigm shifts and entry into other streams of spirituality, were accompanied by reservations, questions, fears, confusion and doubts---yet they also proved themselves by becoming life-giving for me and allowing me to know God and his love more.

## NEW PATHWAYS REQUIRE EXPRESSION IN NEW SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

As Jesus said, new wine requires new wineskins. As God began to lead and push me along new paths of spiritual formation, He also brought me into contact with new spiritual disciplines to keep me on those paths. Two key contributions came from a mentor, Dr. Hans Bärki, and a Doctor of Ministry Course. Through the ministry of Hans, I was introduced into new spiritual disciplines which opened more windows for the light of Christ to stream into my life. The culminating experience was a month spent with a small group on a mountain top in Switzerland. There we essentially reviewed our lives and practiced appropriate spiritual disciplines. Jesus became more personal, more real than ever. I tasted of Him and his goodness, and hungered and thirsted for more.

Author: Doug Stewart; Type: Spiritual Formation; Additional resources for Spiritual Formation and Prayer can be found at: [www.address](http://www.address)

The other turning point was a course in the DMIN program at Fuller Seminary, called "Spirituality and Ministry," taught by Dr. Roberta Hestenes. In it I found more formal definition and explanation of the disciplines I had been practicing from Hans', and greater understanding of the streams of Christian spirituality from which they came. The course helped define a paradigm shift which was being birthed in me: to root and ground my ministry in my relationship with Christ, as Jesus sets forth in John 15, rather than doing it more out of the experience, skills and "know how" I had acquired in more than 20 years of ministry.

### Examples: Six clusters of Life-giving Spiritual Disciplines added in the Second Half.

To Scripture study, which for so long had been dominant, I added *lectio divina*, which is essentially reading Scripture in such a way that allows Christ to choose what He wants to speak to me. Scripture study shaped my mind and beliefs, but did not always renew my heart or connect directly with my own struggles and needs. *Lectio* allowed Jesus to speak to me personally, as he promised that he knows his sheep by name and his sheep would hear his voice.

Another Scripture discipline I added was **meditation** on Biblical texts, which is taking in a text—long or short—and sticking with it and often turning to it, to allow it to take root in my mind and work its way out into my life. I had to shift from thinking that simply taking in more Scripture, a greater quantity of Scriptural knowledge and information, would result in more of God and more transformation in me. Seeing that this was not the case in me, I learned from Jesus through Scripture that what matters is not how much Scripture falls on the soil of my life, but rather how deeply it penetrates, takes root and remains in my life. Biblical meditation, so frequently referred to in the Scriptures, allows Scripture to be taken in and take root. It opens space for the Holy Spirit to "bring to mind" words that we have heard or read. (Incidentally, meditation on Biblical texts is only part of the more general practice of meditation which the Bible teaches, which includes the words of Scripture, the works and providence of God in history, the works of God in creation, and our own selves, experiences and history.)

To spontaneous intercessory and petitionary prayer, I added several other forms of prayer. **Centering prayer**, which is consciously being still in the presence of Christ, to be with him and gaze on him in stillness and silence. This is prayer as resting in and before God, depending on the deeper work of the Holy Spirit beyond mental engagement. Another form of prayer, which has helped me greatly to pray regularly, is **liturgical prayer**. This is praying with fixed, written guides, to focus and stimulate prayer while allowing for spontaneous, Spirit-led prayer. A principal example of liturgical prayer is the Lord's prayer. It has become a fixed, regular part of my prayers to God. In the prayer Jesus gave us, I not only am guided to pray well, but find a pattern of prayer to guide me, as rails do a train, and find I am being shaped inwardly, in mind and heart, as I regularly pray and meditate this prayer. It is now a major means of aligning me with the life I want to lead, centered in God's glory and his kingdom's coming.

I added intentional practices of **silence and solitude**. These spiritual disciplines of "abstinence," as Dallas Willard calls them, had found little place in my "activist" oriented and performance oriented approach to everything: life, spiritual growth and ministry. These disciplines were hard to learn, for they often felt counterintuitive to my approach to life and ministry, and seemed to be "non-productive," or a waste of time. Yet they have become now the richest sources of renewal and right alignment in my life with God. The silence and solitude may be only for a few minutes; it may be for several hours, or take the form of a **retreat** for a day or more. As the practice of outward forms of silence and solitude has continued, I have found it easier and natural to come to inner quietness and stillness before God and myself, and others! (A new direction for an extrovert!)

A major growing edge became the addition and practice of **disciplines of community**. I always had friends and acquaintances, being an extrovert, but still found a growing loneliness in my life and a lack of openness to input from others. I had learned a "loner" style of ministry—God and I were enough. I added—with a lot of effort and resistance—**spiritual friendships**, which were peer relationships which centered on mutual disclosure, speaking appropriately words or questions of discernment, and prayer. I discovered my friendships had been functional and mostly superficial or task or issue centered. They did not touch my soul and deep inner life.

Another expression of this kind of relationship I chose was **spiritual direction**. With much fear and hesitation and awkwardness, I sought out a man to become my spiritual director. That is, one to whom I would

Additional Resources for Spiritual Formation and Prayer can be found at:

open myself up with honesty and transparency about my inner world and walk with God and others, and allow this other to probe, point out, interpret my experiences, as well as to simply affirm and support me in what I was undergoing. God has used these two disciplines of community to bring much more freedom, honesty, self-understanding, grace and compassion into my life.

A third discipline of community has been to choose to be in a **local church** where I could receive and be nourished as a needy sinner and struggling follower of Jesus just like everyone else. This choice involved stepping down off of the leadership pedestal, from which I could teach and give to others, and it meant I would not always be contributing, ministering or taking charge of something in the church's life. Before, I saw the local church as an opportunity—and responsibility—to exercise leadership and ministry, usually with a view to helping it become more like what I thought a "good" local church should be! I was involved more from the posture of reformer than learner, of giver than receiver, of sufficient than of needy. Thankfully, I have found that the local church has become increasingly my primary social and spiritual community, where I receive, am nourished, feel I belong and meet God, and yes, where I still am able to give and minister. I have become more human along the way, I believe.

Finally, to disciplines of service and engagement for the sake of the Kingdom—always strong passions in me—was added the **discipline of worship**. I say "was added" because I discovered it rather than chose it, I was led into it rather than developed it. In the discipline of worship, I turn once again to the fountain and source of my life and energy—to the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in his love, goodness, grace, wisdom, power, beauty, holiness and greatness, not just a attributes of him but also as manifested and experienced in history, and in my own history. Worship had always been a "duty," but not a delight. God moved me into worshipping him as a primary discipline through a local Anglican church, with its liturgy which led participants to worship God, the Eucharist which made worship visible, participatory and tangible, centered always on the death, resurrection and presence of Christ by His Spirit. Rather than only hearing a message which usually told me what I ought to do, I also was being brought to a Table where I was fed, strengthened and reminded of Jesus who loved me and gave himself for me. The regular practice of this spiritual discipline of worship has slowly and gently oriented me to living with God in joyful reception of his multi-faceted grace and to "mini" expressions of worship and thanksgiving during the days.

I must add that I am inconsistent in my practice of these disciplines, and always struggle with temptations to convert them into "meritorious" works with God, which of course results in pride, fear, guilt and bondage! But God always finds ways of recalling me to rest in him alone and enjoy his unconditional and enduring-forever-love, and to use spiritual disciplines rightly, as "means of grace," rather than as point-getters with a point-keeping God.

## CONCLUSION

God always wants to lead us on to a great knowledge of Him, of ourselves and of the world. This inward journey involves inward renewal and transformation and by the presence of the Spirit of God in us, it can be lived out in all circumstances and at all stages of our outer journey. Our own lives and histories are where God will meet and teach us and renew us. In Westminster Abbey, inscribed on the plaque honoring John and Charles Wesley are John's words to Charles: "The best is yet to come." With God leading the journey, I have found this to be true.