

Chapter One

Commitment - Make time for God

Picking blackberries is no easy proposition. Preparations are needed and available time scheduled. There are several other factors involved besides my calendar, one of them being the blackberries themselves! Are they ripe and ready to be picked? The weather is another important variable. Although I enjoy a good thunderstorm and love to watch the lightening rip across the sky, I normally observe this spectacle from the comfort of my dry, safe home.

Climbing deep into our woods to pick blackberries is definitely not on my list of enjoyable, or wise, actions. No, not even with an umbrella! Hot and humid weather is uncomfortable, but this is not a good excuse to leave the berry picking to another day. Both of these factors, the ripeness of the berries and the weather, are out of my control and I need to adjust my schedule to fit the conditions.

My relationship with God is very similar. Too often I want to fit God into my schedule when spending time with Him suits me. I allow myself to get too busy with my own pre-occupations and I put my Bible reading off to the side. I postpone volunteering or getting involved with church activities until I have

more time to devote to it. The problem for me is that if I don't make the time to do these things, the time will not magically appear. I need to make the commitment to spend time with God and to grow closer to Him, which will necessarily require me to re-assess and re-organize my priorities. If I truly want to be intimate with God, I need to invest time into my relationship with Him. When I married my husband, I didn't continue to live as a single person by going out with my friends and spending my time as I desired and neither did he. We build our relationship by spending time together, talking, learning about each other and growing closer.

Thankfully, God is not like blackberries. He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow and He will always be there to welcome me with open arms whenever I decide I have the time. I need to be careful though that I do not harden my heart (Hebrews 3:7-13) and wait too long. Not because God has a limited time offer, but because once I fill the holes in my life with something besides God, it gets harder and harder to let those things go. God doesn't change, but I do. The rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30) looked for confirmation from Jesus that he was good enough for eternity, but instead he found his heart exposed and his loyalties challenged. We cannot serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24).

To prevent myself from letting the things of this world fill the places of my mind and soul that are meant for God, I need to seek Him and His kingdom while the timing is right, before it's too late. Matthew 7:7 tells us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." For me, the best time of the day to commit spending time with God is early in the morning. I get up before everyone else in the house and while I'm drinking my coffee I read my daily Bible reading from my One-Year Bible. This format is very convenient because it combines readings from the Old Testament, the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs each day. It takes about fifteen minutes and I read through the entire Bible every year. By reading my Bible first thing in the morning, God's words stick with me throughout the day and it becomes easier to keep Him first and foremost in my thoughts. I talk to Him during the day about whatever might be on my mind and try to be still to hear His answers.

I grew up in a very negative family. For them, complaining was as natural as breathing. When I became a Christian, I realized that this was not a very good habit and it compromised my ability to maintain the joy the Bible tells me I'm supposed to have. Whenever I would get upset, I tried to count my blessings

and all the reasons I had to be grateful, but it was very difficult to do when I was already in distress. I decided that writing a list of my blessings and then reviewing it when I was down might be more helpful in getting me through those pity party days, so I started a Gratitude journal. Each morning after my Bible reading, I write down the things that I am thankful to God from the previous day. Good health, safety, the weather, or if I had a really rough day and don't think I can find even one thing to be grateful for, then I thank Him for His mercy, grace and forgiveness. Sometimes I turn my requests into a "thank you" trusting God to address the situation and answer prayers. For example, I might write, "thank You Father for comforting me through this difficult time". I may still be grieving when I write that and not feeling much comfort at all, but somehow thanking Him helps me to recognize that He is with me and I will get through the dark days. Since I do not allow myself to write any requests in this journal, it has been very helpful in "re-training" me to see God's hand in my daily life. Instead of focusing on the negative and all the things I don't have or that went wrong, my gratitude journal forces me to recognize all the things I do have and the things that went right. It can be very interesting to flip through the prior entries and see how I was feeling, what was going on in our lives, and recognize how God was with us through it all.

I love Psalm 5:3, "In the morning, o Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation." It paints such a beautiful picture for me. I see a glorious sunrise full of reds, pinks, and oranges in a cloudless bright blue sky. I see myself sitting on a large rock at the top of a hill overlooking a meadow and breathlessly waiting for His answers. It fills me with hope and joy knowing that He hears me and is able to answer me. With this image in my mind, I pray for my family, friends, co-workers and myself.

To receive God's blessings, we need to prepare ourselves. Growing closer to Him helps us to identify His hand working in our lives because He may not always answer us in the way we want or think He should. By developing our relationship with Him, our hearts begin to recognize His love, not just for us, but for the world and His answers become clearer to us. But first, I must make the commitment and devote time to Him. God does not desire our sacrifices, but a broken and contrite heart (Proverbs 51:16-17). It all begins with me and my choice to make God a priority in my life.

Assessment and Further Thought

What prevents me from spending daily time with God?

What steps can I take to set aside 15-30 minutes each day for prayer or bible reading?

Are there other tools I can use to keep me focused on the Lord each day (prayer journal, note cards, Christian music)?

What aspect of my background might be a stumbling block to spending time with God?

Verses for study and encouragement

Psalm 119:11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you

Matthew 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing

Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, please help me to grow closer to You. Show me where I need to adjust my priorities and my schedule to reflect the importance I place on our relationship. Grant me wisdom and discernment in these areas and in deciding when to ask for help from others. Thank You for Your constant invitation and for the desire and motivation to make changes in this life to prepare me for the eternal life I will have with You. Amen

Additional items for prayer