

CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

Donovan L. Graham

SPACE FOR GOD

spaceforgod20@gmail.com

www.aspaceforgod.com

An Invitation

“Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence.

And he is inviting you—and me—to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in.

For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.

We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart’s delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events. He invites us into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be naked and vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest.” (*Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, Richard Foster)

A Perspective

“The Celts had a way of seeing God that fed off a passion that crystallized in what the Welsh called *gorfoleddu*, “ecstatic rejoicing.” The word is more than praise, and it is certainly more than prayer. In fact, it is a kind of compulsion that caused the worshiper to seek Christ with utter abandon, which was driven by a mind frame of zealous worship. It is *gorfoleddu* that prompts our need to pray, and it is its absence that causes us not to pray.

Most evangelicals I know want to achieve power in prayer . . . what is often lacking in their prayer life is a genuine passion that wants to be with God for the sake of union with Christ (the *gorfoleddu* of their own eager spirits).

Those who speak of achieving ‘power in prayer’ are generally seeking it for petition and intercession. Those most eager to talk to God for the sheer pleasure of being in his presence are serving their inner exuberance of loving God for no end in mind except the joy of being in his presence. Genuine prayer rarely emanates from how-to sources. It is always born from the hunger and the passion that rises from the believer’s hunger for a relationship with the Almighty.

. . . if, throughout our lives, we have only gone to God in prayer asking him for ‘stuff,’ we shall find ourselves very quiet, not knowing what to say when our asking season is over. This *gorfoleddu*, this ecstatic rejoicing speaks of the uncontrollable joy of being in his presence. It is a word that speaks of the high romance of prayer. Those who come to know it, realize that it’s a word that is too delirious with love ever to measure its propriety. It is like lovers separated by war and distance, when they approach the time of reunion, are not to be held accountable for wild joy. In such moments, the lovers have no lists of needs they wish supplied. The moment is the gift. Togetherness is the prize of life.” (*The Path of Celtic Prayer*, Calvin Miller)

Entering Solitude and Silence

“Although the discipline of solitude asks us to set aside time and space, what finally matters is that our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do. The more we train ourselves to spend time with God and God alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places. Then we will be able to recognize God even in the midst of a busy and active life. Once the solitude of time and place has become a solitude of the heart, we will never have to leave that solitude. We will be able to live the spiritual life in any place and any time. Thus the discipline of solitude enables us to live active lives in the world, while remaining always in the presence of the living God.” (*Making All Things New*, Henri Nouwen)

“Silence means rest, rest of body and mind, in which we become available for God. This is very threatening. It is like giving up control over our actions and thoughts, allowing something creative to happen not by us but to us. Is it so amazing that we are so often tired and exhausted, trying to be masters of ourselves, wanting to grasp the ultimate meaning of our existence, struggling with our identity? Silence is that moment in which we not only stop the discussion with others but also the inner discussions with ourselves, in which we can breathe freely and accept our identity as a gift. “Not I live, but He lives in me.” It is in this silence that the Spirit of God can pray in us and continue its creative work in us. . . . Without silence the Spirit will die in us and the creative energy of our life will float away and leave us alone, cold and tired. Without silence we will lose our center and become victims of the many who constantly demand our attention.” (*Training for the Campus Ministry*, Henri Nouwen)

Beginning a Conversation with God

“[A Celtic perspective on prayer] has the power to excite within you a nobler understanding of the nature of talking *with* God. (Notice I did not say talking *to* God.) Prayer, at best, is a conversation of lovers, and when either side starts only talking *to* and quits talking *with* all real conversation is over. But the conversation is the point. Those who only talk to God to talk him into things have generally made God their lackey who is constantly subject to their feelings of need and want. Those who seek him for the joy of being in his presence have been motivated by a passion for his presence. When this becomes the hallmark of our devotion, then our lives are spent as a kind of rehearsal for heaven.” (*The Path of Celtic Prayer*, Calvin Miller)

A conversation *with* God involves both speaking *and* listening. It is a dialogue, not just a monologue of requests. Asking for things may well be included, but that is not the main focus of a conversation between two who love each other. They want to share and hear what is on each other’s hearts.

1st exercise—looking inward

Settle into a comfortable position in your body and sit quietly for a few moments, breathing deeply, paying attention to your inhaling and exhaling.

Sit quietly at the base of the tree that is your life and begin to notice what is true about you these days. Don’t rush or try to make anything happen. Let your soul venture out and say something to you that perhaps you have had a hard time acknowledging: Is there a particular joy you are celebrating? A loss you are grieving? Are there tears that have been waiting to be shed? A question that is stirring? An emotion that needs expression?

Sit with what comes into your awareness, becoming conscious of God’s presence with you in that awareness. Don’t try to do anything with [this] except be with it. . . . Feel the difference between trying to fix it and just being with it. Feel the difference between doing something with it and resting with it. Feel the difference between trying to fight it and letting God fight for you. What does it mean for you to be still and let God fight (or work) for you in this particular area? (taken from *Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton)

Listening to God

2nd exercise— encountering Jesus in a biblical story

As you allow yourself to encounter Jesus in a story or parable, quietly read and reflect on the incident, placing yourself in the middle of the scene. Notice what is around you, the look on Jesus' face, the reaction of those involved, his tone of voice, and your own emotions as you hear and see him telling this story.

Apply this process by putting yourself in the place of Bartimaeus—Mark 10:46-52. Move from what you have observed concerning what is true about yourself in exercise 1 to an awareness of your deeper longings. As Jesus comes by your longings can no longer be contained. How do you get his attention? What do you say to him? What do you feel? As Jesus stops and you are brought face to face with him he asks “What do you want me to do for you?” As you answer that question, give both the question and your answer all the time they need. After you have expressed your desires listen for Jesus' response.

Other possible passages to encounter Jesus as you face your longings:

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| John 4:1-42 | --woman at the well |
| Luke 10:38-42 | --Mary and Martha |
| Luke 22:54-62 | --Peter denies Jesus |

3rd exercise—consider the lilies

In listening to what Jesus may have to say it may be good to go for a walk—better yet, a *stroll*—paying attention to what you observe. Allow Jesus to respond through nature if he chooses.

David says that he considers the heavens and the work of God’s fingers. Jesus tells his followers to “look at the birds,” and to “consider the lilies.” That is for more than an appreciation of God’s creation, though that is the place to begin. God wants us to contemplate what is before us because it is *one way of making himself present to us*.

To do such obviously requires us to slow down. As you “stroll” or sit, allow yourself to *notice* what is around you and ask the following questions:

1. What is God saying through this scene or object?
2. What is he saying to *me*?
3. What would it be like to *be* that object or part of that scene?
4. How could I take what I have seen/experienced into my world?

This exercise probably works best when done in the setting of nature, but it can be done while indoors as well. It just requires that you focus on something and give yourself time to *consider* it. You could notice a cobweb in the corner and do it! But you cannot hurry. Slow down, be quiet, notice, and listen. (portions taken from *The Joy of Listening to God*, Joyce Huggett)

A word of explanation: This is not pantheistic, nor is it an invitation to hear your own voice (or the voice of the Enemy) and assume it is the voice of God. God’s voice in nature and his voice in the written Word are never in conflict. Revelation in nature is always to be measured against revelation in the Scriptures. See that any message from God through nature has some biblical basis for acceptance before you take it as a message from God.

4th exercise— *lectio divina*

Lectio Divina is neither study nor exegesis, it is meant to help us receive a *personal* message from God through his Word. The title means “divine reading.” The steps in the process are:

1. Select a **brief** passage and read it slowly, 2 or 3 times, simply noticing what word or phrase seems to *grab your attention*. Repeat the word or phrase a number of times, just sitting with it.
2. Read the passage again 2 or 3 times, asking the Lord to reveal to you how the word or phrase *connects with your own life*. What does it say to you personally?
3. Read the passage again 2 or 3 times, this time allowing yourself to *respond in prayer* to what God has said to you thus far. Your response may be praise, thanks, questions, confusion, argument, whatever is in your heart as he has spoken to you personally about the word or phrase thus far.
4. *Be silent* in the presence of the Lord, not needing to say or do anything. Allow him to fill the silence and your heart with his presence in any way he sees fit.

If you get bogged down or distracted, simply begin the process again. Do not hurry. Allow God to have you and this time without any direction from you.

Possible passages:

Isaiah 43:1-4	--do not fear, I love you
Zephaniah 3:16-17	--He will quiet you with his love
Matthew 11:28-30	--come, you who are weary
Hebrews 4:14-16	--Jesus, our high priest

Speaking to God

5th exercise— praying the Psalms

If we are to enter into a deep-heart relationship with God, we must learn to talk with him from the depths of our own soul and listen to the depths of his. That means the emotions which lie deepest in our being—be they joyful, despairing, angry, or delightful—must be given to God in conversation with him, and we must listen to what he cares about.

The Psalms are God’s guidebook for doing both. We do the speaking part by **personalizing** the words of a psalm as it expresses desires, emotions, fears, dreams, and hopes that are our own. Psalmists cried out in agony and danced for joy, screamed at God and praised him with loud singing and trumpets. All were signs of their ultimate trusting of themselves to him. We may do the same.

Take the words of a psalm and make them your own, putting the specific people, events, and details that make it “yours” into the psalm as you speak it to God. Do not hold back. Do not be surprised by the depth and breadth of your emotions. Reap the joy of being able to “dump it all” on your loving Father without fear or shame. Then, do not prescribe how he ought to respond. It may be only a simple “I hear you,” or it could even be silence. God is not manageable in this.

Possible Psalms:

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| Psalm 142 | --I cry out to you |
| Psalm 25 | --I trust you; do not let me be put to shame |
| Psalm 27 | --whom shall I fear? |
| Psalm 116 | --I love you, Lord; you hear my voice |

6th exercise— writing a psalm

While praying the Psalms is one way of *speaking* to God, writing your own psalm is still another. The prospect of writing a psalm may seem frightening, but among other things we can view a psalm as a written expression of all the emotions and experiences of life placed before God. The psalmist merely tells God what he is thinking or feeling. No emotions are held back—be they emotions of agony or ecstasy. Assurances are spoken as God reminds the psalmist of who he is. Questions and doubts are voiced as God seems distant and silent. Confusion is expressed when life makes no sense, and fear is exclaimed when it is the reality of the psalmists life. You may do the same.

7th exercise—long wandering prayer

“Long wandering prayer happens on the inside like it happens on the outside. It is mental wandering in the presence of God, corresponding to physical wandering in the presence of God. Long wandering prayer involves leaving our normal environment for the express purpose of spending many hours alone with God. It involves walking, or at least moving, and stopping whenever we want, to consider a lily for as long as we desire. Long wandering prayer uses the fact that our minds wander as an advantage to prayer rather than as a disadvantage. . . . In this kind of prayer we recognize the wandering mind as a precious resource for complex and startling dialogue with God.” (*Long Wandering Prayer*, David Hansen)

This kind of prayer can best be done when you can walk, and talk out loud—a great thing for those who find it hard to sit still! Do not worry about saying profound things; say simply whatever comes to mind. Do not think you must say things in “holy” or religious language. Just focus on what you notice and feel free to speak.

We pass up Jesus’ invitation to “consider the lilies” only to our detriment and his disappointment. He loves to hear us express what comes from beholding the wonder of his creation and what it reveals about him.

As the Conversation Ends . . .

8th exercise—resting in silence

Prayer is the means through which we come to know and be known, intimately. Those who love each other know that words only carry them so far. There comes a point in their communication where silence is their richest, fullest exchange; an exchange that leads to communion—a level of intimacy beyond normal communication. They can rest and revel in each other's presence, in silence. Cease talking, cease asking, and cease expecting. You are invited to sit silently in the presence of the God who loves you without measure and simply revel in his presence, allowing him to fill that silence in any way he desires.

A Rhythm to Create Space for God

Jesus moved *in* and *out*—into the presence of his Father, and back out to a broken, chaotic world of need and loss; in and out, in and out. He went into the presence of his Father to be reminded of who he was (his Father's beloved Son), of his security (his Father was well pleased with him), and to discover what he was to be about (he did only what his Father told him to do). These are our big questions as well: Who am I? Will I be okay? and What am I to be about? We need to hear the Father speak to these questions, to help us make sense of the fallen world into which he has sent us. But, like Jesus, we must be alone with the Father to hear his still, small voice that is often drowned out by the cacophony of noise in our broken world. There he will remind us of who we are (the beloved, who is one with Jesus), reassure us of our security (in the Father's love), and re-direct us as we move back into the world (through the Holy Spirit who lives within us). I want to suggest that this requires certain things of us.

Motivation—we may begin from a sense of need or duty, but unless our motivation moves to *desire*, it will wither like an unwatered plant. Lovers *desire* intimacy and we must become receptive to the idea that God desires intimacy with us and begin to see union with him as an ultimate aim in the Christian life. Kingdom work and ministry are natural out-workings of the union; if not, they are the mere result of our own gifts and determination.

Time—we must begin to carve out some extended, unhurried periods of time on a regular basis. It cannot be excess or free time; it must be a conscious choice to

walk away from the world of need and chaos as it was for Jesus. And, we must be pretty unmovable about our commitment to it.

Place—it is important to identify a place where we can meet with God; a place that is specifically for that purpose; a place where we will not be interrupted or distracted by the normal demands of life. Meeting with the One who loves us so deeply is best served in a special place.

Persistence—the major contribution on our part is that we *show up!* This kind of overhaul in life takes time and practice. We may experience frustration, a sense of futility, emptiness and all manner of “legitimate” reasons why we cannot do this or it will not work. But as we begin to let God have his way with us and let him set the agenda for when we meet alone, we will eventually realize that something very good is happening when we meet with him. It becomes *our* delight just as it is *his*. Our togetherness is becoming the “prize of life.”

Readings Helpful for Prayer, Solitude, Rest, Intimacy with God

Author	Title	Publisher	Date
Anderson, Fil	<i>Running on Empty: Contemplative Spirituality for Overachievers</i>	Waterbrook	2004
Ashbrook, R. Thomas	<i>Mansions of the Heart: Exploring the Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth</i>	Jossey-Bass	2009
Barton, Ruth Haley	<i>Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence</i>	IVP	2004
Barton, Ruth Haley	<i>Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation</i>	IVP	2006
Benner, David G.	<i>Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality</i>	IVP	2003
Benner, David G.	<i>The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self Discovery</i>	IVP	2004
Benner, David G.	<i>Desiring God's Will: Aligning Our Hearts with the Heart of God</i>	IVP	2005
Breedlove, Sally	<i>Choosing Rest: Cultivating a Sunday Heart in a Monday World</i>	NavPress	2002
Buchanan, Mark	<i>The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath</i>	W Publishing	2006
Foster, Richard	<i>Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth</i>	Harper Collins	1998
Foster, Richard	<i>Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home</i>	Harper Collins	1992
Griffin, Emilie	<i>Clinging: The Experience of Prayer</i>	Eighth Day Press	2003
Griffin, Emilie	<i>Wilderness Time: A Guide for Spiritual Retreat</i>	Harper Collins	1997
Guyon, Jeanne	<i>Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ</i>	Christian Books Pub. (1685)	1975
Hall, Thelma	<i>Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina with 500 Scripture Texts for Prayer</i>	Paulist Press	1988
Hansen, David	<i>Long Wandering Prayer: An Invitation to Walk With God</i>	IVP	2001
Heschel, Abraham	<i>The Sabbath</i>	Farrar, Straus, Giroux	1951

Houston, James	<i>The Transforming Power of Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship with God</i>	NavPress	1996
Howard, Evan B.	<i>Praying the Scriptures: A Field Guide for Your Spiritual Journey</i>	IVP	1999
Huggett, Joyce	<i>Praying the Parables: A Spiritual Journey Through the Stories of Jesus</i>	IVP	1996
Huggett, Joyce	<i>The Joy of Listening to God: Hearing the Many Ways God Speaks to Us</i>	IVP	1986
Johnson, Jan	<i>Enjoying the Presence of God</i>	NavPress	1996
Miller, Calvin	<i>The Path of Celtic Prayer: An Ancient Way to Everyday Joy</i>	IVP	2007
Moon, Gary	<i>Apprenticeship with Jesus: Learning to Live Like the Master</i>	Baker	2009
Moon, Gary	<i>Falling for God: Saying Yes to His Extravagant Proposal</i>	Shaw	2004
Mulholland, M. Robert	<i>The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self</i>	IVP	2006
Peterson, Eugene H.	<i>Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer</i>	Harper	1989
Rubietta, Jane	<i>Resting Place: A Personal Guide to Spiritual Retreats</i>	IVP	2005
Smith, Gordon T.	<i>The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit</i>	IVP	2003
Swenson, Richard A.	<i>Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives</i>	NavPress	1992
Swenson, Richard A.	<i>The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits</i>	NavPress	1998
Young, Ben & Adams, Samuel	<i>Out of Control: Finding Peace for the Physically Exhausted and Spiritually Strung Out</i>	Nelson	2006
Tan, Siang-Yang	<i>Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World</i>	Regent College Pub.	2000
Willard, Dallas	<i>Living in Christ's Presence</i>	IVP	2014

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Notes

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