

A Parent's Guide To Prayer



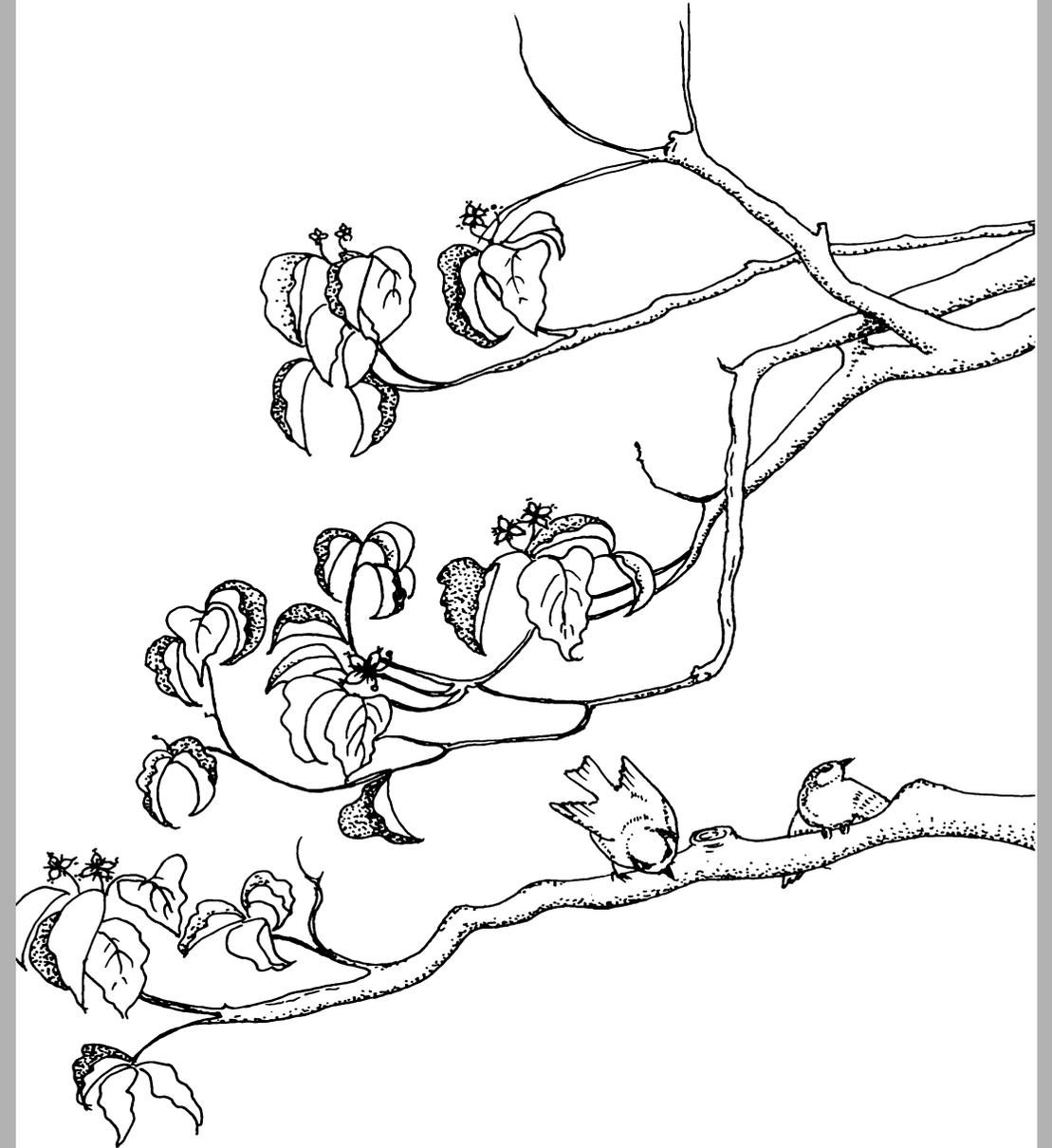
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*Our imagination so magnifies the present,
because we are continually thinking about
it, that we turn eternity into nothing and
nothing into eternity.*

Blaise Pascal

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How Do Scripture and Devotional Works Help Our Prayer Lives?

Perhaps the most important way to get to know God and ourselves is through the study and discussion of and meditating upon scripture. This practice is an important building block for a realistic understanding and relationship with God. Scripture is one of the ways God communicates with us. It is through scripture your children will learn to communicate with God.

Children are seekers. They are drawn to the biblical story if it is properly presented. The Bible speaks to us in many different voices. It covers a few thousand centuries of people's experiences with God and their interpretations of those experiences. The Bible is a multi-layered collection of various works

presented in different literary genres. No one book or no one episode in the Bible can be read in isolation and held to contain all the truths found in the Bible. Each book in the Bible forces us to reconsider and reinterpret every other book in the Bible and our currently held understanding of God.

Early Christians adopted the Old Testament as their scripture because they believed they could not ignore God's revelation as found in the Jewish scriptures. The New Testament was written to preserve people's knowledge and experiences with Jesus. It was written for believers. It contains "faith summaries" reflecting the beliefs of early Christians written long after the death of Jesus. The writings found in the New Testament vary in tone and content depending on the needs of the people and the audience addressed; such as the educated and non-educated; as well as Greek, Jewish, and Roman peoples.

Though many of our ways of experiencing life have changed from biblical times—through technology, knowledge, and the development of new social, political, cultural, and economic institutions—our emotional and spiritual needs have not changed. It is as easy today to identify with Joseph's brothers as it was when his brothers first experienced their jealousy over the preferential treatment Joseph received from their father.

The meaning of scripture is not frozen in the past. Each generation brings its own life experiences to scripture and makes new discoveries. God's Spirit helps us lift the veil covering the meaning of the text. We can help children enter into a conversation with the text and the characters in the story. We can ask them to assume they are one of the characters. What do they think that character is trying to say or achieve? We can ask them to try to envision the story from different perspectives. We can ask them to assume they are the person opposed to God's will and sometimes the person working in accord with God's will. What is happening in the biblical scene? Have them change their roles, their gender, and their age and reenter the scriptural scene. How differently do they experience the story with these changes? How is God's word opening up to them?

Let their imaginations work. Let them pretend they are Joseph the young man, one of his brothers, his father, Potiphar, the chief butler, the chief baker, the Pharaoh. What are their struggles, tensions, loves, hates, desires, and passions? How does each of them suppress these feelings or let them dominate them and why? What happens when they lose control of their feelings? What is good about and what is bad about losing such control?

One or more of the above-listed characters are close to our and your children's inner, hidden personalities, our latent feelings and thoughts, and those of your children. One such latent feeling is the dominant need for approval. We find we need to be affirmed. We come to understand the relationship between God and what we think of ourselves. Could Joseph have survived slavery and imprisonment without a conviction that God loved him? How was Joseph able to forgive his brothers?

When studying scripture in this way, keep all questions open ended and in a "what if?" mode. People then and now have to live life filled with its uncertainties and changing circumstances. To survive, children need to develop critical thinking skills in how to solve the moral dilemmas of life while still staying in a right relationship with God and each other. Listen and allow your children to speak openly in a non-judgmental, open environment. Set aside your preconceived ideas as to what we think they should be saying. Challenge and listen to the text and to them. In such an environment your children can think beyond their age. Through this method, you will learn as much from them as they will from you about God's word to us.

Children can nourish their spiritual, moral, and intellectual development by studying the word of God. They need not hurry through the Bible. In Sunday school, they can act out different biblical scenes, discuss them by entering into them, and draw their interpretations of them. Most of the Sunday school class is preparation for prayer. Children listen and absorb the message of scripture with its richness in variety and depth of

meaning. If the Bible is superficially taught, their prayer will be spiritually impoverished.

It is important to remember that the early church searched the Old Testament to discover the importance and meaning of Jesus. Jesus laid the basis for this search on the road to Emmaus when He said to His disciples:

“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Luke 24:25-27

In effect Jesus is saying to us that to learn about God we cannot take scripture at face value. Scripture contains many gradations of meanings and interpretations. We only get a fraction of its meaning with each reading. We need to look at the whole and then the parts and then back to the whole.

The prophet Hosea speaks for God when he tells us what the heart of faith and prayer is all about: “For I desire *steadfast love* and not sacrifice, the *knowledge of God*, rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6).

Prayer is meant to flow from this steadfast love and knowledge of God. Our religious rituals and celebrations are meaningless if we lack love and knowledge. Religious rituals are the outer form of worship. Something must also occur in the inner being. The prophet Amos spoke for God when he said:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Amos 5:21-24

Justice and righteousness are the fruits of love, knowledge, and communion with God. Prayer as communion with God should be an integral part of service and mission.

Children are attempting to understand the world around them. They use their keen imaginations. They search stories, myths, fantasies, legends—religious and secular life—in their search for meaning and purpose. That is why they and we are so interested in other people’s lives, their stories, especially those of the rich and famous, so that we can find a kernel of truth that will help us explain these riddles of life.

It is also important, therefore, to help them find God through other avenues of exploration in addition to the Bible such as devotional works, edifying literature, and biographies that reveal hope, faith in God, and courage against all odds. Children see with their hearts as well as with their intellect.