



## A Simple Four-Day Plan

Once you get a feel for it, praying relationally comes as naturally as breathing. Relating to God is what we were designed to do.

But the feel doesn't come so easily. We've grown accustomed to thinking of prayer as our chance to get from God whatever we believe we need (or want) to live satisfying and meaningful lives. Learning to pray as our primary means of relating to God requires intentionality. It takes some practice.

So I've developed a plan to get you started. The plan is really a synthesis of what I've been clumsily doing for nearly a year to make relational prayer the center of my life. It's a simple plan, one that requires only a little time during four days.

Of course, it's only a beginning, but the journey from the city to the beach begins with the first few steps. I'm suggesting four steps in what I call the Four-Day Plan.

- Day 1: Learning to *present* yourself to God
- Day 2: Learning to *attend* to how you are thinking of God
- Day 3: Learning to *purge* yourself of anything that blocks your relationship with God

Day 4: Learning to *approach* God as the “first thing” in your life

For each day, the plan provides four things:

1. A learning objective, contrasted with what you may need to unlearn.
2. A Bible passage to read and ponder first thing in the morning, along with a brief discussion of the key point of the passage as it relates to the part of the PAPA prayer being considered that day.
3. A reflection question about the passage to ask yourself throughout the day in order to direct your attention to the prayer focus for that day.
4. An illustration of that day’s prayer focus designed to guide you in writing your own prayer before you go to bed.

Begin any day you choose. If you’re going to follow the plan with your spouse, friend, or small group (which I strongly suggest), then you should all begin the Four-Day Plan on the same day so you can better track your experiences with each other. It’s essential that everyone read and discuss *The PAPA Prayer* before beginning the Four-Day Plan.

Is all that clear? You’ll be learning to identify and verbalize your red dot on day 1.

On day 2, you’ll take a look at who you envision God to be when you pray, and you’ll compare that picture to who the Bible reveals God to be.

Day 3 might be painful, but it will be liberating. You’ll be asking God’s Spirit to reveal to you who or what you value more than God.

And finally, on day 4, you’ll claim your privilege as God’s son or daughter by walking right up to Him in order to enjoy relating to Him. You’ll find a few mountains blocking your path, but ask Jesus to hurl them into the sea. He will.

DAY 1:  
LEARNING TO PRESENT YOURSELF TO GOD

*Learning Objective*

Present authentically to God whatever you discover in yourself, whether good or bad.

Don't hold anything back.

Don't pretend that what's going on inside you (e.g. hatred) really isn't happening.

Don't trivialize what's happening as unimportant, petty, not worth mentioning.

Don't spin whatever you discover that's disagreeable into something more pleasant.

*Stand in your red dot.*

Be who you are, where you are.

**Bible Passage** (Read first thing on day 1.)

No doubt about it! God is good—good to good people, good to the good-hearted.

But I nearly missed it, missed seeing his goodness.

I was looking the other way, looking up to the people at the top, envying the wicked who have it made,

Who have nothing to worry about, not a care in the whole wide world.

Pretentious with arrogance, they wear the latest fashions in violence.

Pampered and overfed, decked out in silk bows of silliness.

They jeer, using words to kill; they bully their way with words.

They're full of hot air, loudmouths disturbing the peace.

People actually listen to them—can you believe it? Like thirsty puppies, they lap up their words.

What's going on here? Is God out to lunch? Nobody's tending the store.

The wicked get by with everything; they have it made, piling up riches.

I've been stupid to play by the rules; what has it gotten me?

A long run of bad luck, that's what—a slap in the face every time I walk out the door.

If I'd given in and talked like this, I would have betrayed your dear children.

Still, when I tried to figure it out, all I got was a splitting headache.  
(Psalm 73:1–16 MSG; if you have time, read it also in other translations.)

*Key Point:* Living according to God's principles doesn't guarantee the blessings you want. Living for yourself in this world seems to work better.

The psalmist knew he could discourage younger Christians if he told them what he was thinking. But he told God, and the Spirit saw to it that he left a record of what he told God to encourage us to present ourselves authentically to God. He knew where presenting oneself to God led—to the sanctuary, where the psalmist discovered that what he really wanted was God. Read the rest of the psalm.

**Reflection Question** (Ponder throughout day 1.)

What am I thinking and feeling right now . . .

- as I'm talking with this person?
- as I'm walking through this store?
- as I'm watching television?
- as I'm praying or reading my Bible?

**Illustration of Presenting Yourself to God** (Reflect and journal on the evening of day 1.)

Mark's life is going well: a wife he loves, three great kids, wonderful sales job that pays well, a respected role in his church as an elder and talented vocalist.

The doctor discovers nodules in Mark's throat that may be malignant. Mark tells his wife that God can be trusted. He feels safe in God's care.

The night before the biopsy, he wakes up with a panic attack. He tries to calm himself by saying that God knows his sales job and his musical gift both require a strong voice. Suddenly he realizes he has no guarantee that the nodules will be benign.

He presents himself to God: "It makes no sense to me that You might let me have throat cancer. I have no guarantee I'll ever speak or sing again. That terrifies me. And it seems so unfair. I've served You well all my life. I'm really angry, and scared. I have no idea in the world how to trust You. All this talk of knowing You better in hard times seems empty to me right now—and irritating."

Your experience might reflect the same spirit of entitlement to second things that surfaced in Mark. Or you might be aware of real peace in hard times or humble gratitude in good times.

Hold nothing back.

Pretend about nothing.

Don't trivialize anything.

Spin nothing that's ugly into something pretty.

Be completely honest with God.



## DAY 2:

## LEARNING TO ATTEND TO HOW YOU ARE THINKING OF GOD

***Learning Objective***

Attend to who God really is (as revealed in the Bible) versus who you think God is (based on life experience) or who you want Him to be (based on your felt desires).

Don't assume your view of God is correct.

Don't project your experience with authority figures, especially your father, onto God.

Don't sugarcoat the word *God* to satisfy your desire for a pleasant experience with Him.

Don't believe everything you hear, except from God Himself in the Bible.

*Stand before the God of the Bible.*

You'll fall to your knees, but you'll get up a new person.

**Bible Passage** (Read first thing on day 2.)

These are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD's instruction. They say to the seers, "See no more visions!" and to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!" (Isaiah 30:9–11)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered

their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. (Isaiah 6:1–4)

*Key Point:* Our consuming desire for second things makes us want to see God as nothing more than their friendly provider. Until we see God as unapproachably holy, we will not concern ourselves with the first thing of how we, sinful people, can relate to the holy God.

Isaiah had a difficult life. He delivered a message that his culture did not want to hear. The strength to remain faithful in his preaching and in his life came from seeing God as He really is, a holy God that required Isaiah to deal with one issue before all others: how can a self-obsessed man become God-obsessed? Isaiah 6:5–8 gives the answer. Forgiveness provided by God releases a person to surrender everything to God. It all started with a clear picture of who God is.

### **Reflection Question** (Ponder throughout day 2.)

How am I picturing God right now . . .

- as I’m asking Him to bless me?
- as I’m facing this trial?
- as I’m sitting in church?
- as I’m arguing with a friend?

### **Illustration of Attending to Your Picture of God** (Reflect and journal on the evening of day 2.)

Brenda has struggled for a long time with her relationship to God. Her dad left the family when she was thirteen, after her mother caught



him sexually abusing Brenda. Brenda's first husband regularly watched pornography on the Internet and never approached her for sex.

When they divorced, she began going to church and trusted Christ. She met a wonderful man, married, had three kids, earned a counseling degree, and developed a ministry to abused and divorced women. She still struggled with depression and nightmares but was deeply grateful for the work God had done in her life.

Her husband (then a deacon) confessed to adultery and was truly repentant. Four months after his confession, their seventeen-year-old daughter announced she was pregnant. The church had already asked her husband to resign as deacon. She was now asked to step down from her ministry role to women, which had become a paid staff position in her church.

She attends to how she visualizes God: "God, I've trusted You all these years. I still trust You. But I'm so surprised that all this has happened. Somehow being let go by the church, and not feeling wanted there, is more painful than even my husband's affair or our daughter's pregnancy.

"I guess I've thought of You as some blend of a doting grandfather and a vending machine. Otherwise I wouldn't be so surprised at all that's happened. I want to see You now as You really are, the Holy God who owes me nothing but gives me heaven, my Papa whom I can trust to keep me trusting, my Papa who loves me, who loves me like You love Your Son.

"Coming to Your Son with that sword in His mouth doesn't sound like much fun, but that's what I want to do. I want to know Your light is shining in my heart, no matter how much it hurts."

Your picture of God is distorted. Assume that. Everyone's is. But you want to know God as He really is. Assume that too. His Spirit is in you,



## DAY 3:

LEARNING TO PURGE YOURSELF OF ANYTHING THAT BLOCKS  
YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD*Learning Objective*

Purge whatever is blocking your intimacy with God by acknowledging without excuse or explanation the self-obsession staining your motives that the Spirit chooses to reveal.

Don't simply try hard to be good; don't merely promise to do better.

Don't criticize others' faults without first seeing your own equally serious faults.

Don't redefine your self-obsession into understandable mistakes.

Don't assume that your strong passion for what you believe is right is necessarily holy.

*Stand naked before holiness.*

The more you see your sin, the more you'll be amazed by grace.

**Bible Passage** (Read first thing on day 3.)

Investigate my life, O God, find out everything about me;  
Cross-examine and test me, get a clear picture of what I'm about;  
See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong—then guide me  
on the road to eternal life. (Psalm 139:23–24 MSG)

*Key Point:* Nobody moves toward real Christlikeness without humility. Humility is not a bad self-image or a nonassertive personality. Humility is an eager willingness to see where you are wrong in order to experience the power of God that has already made you fit for His presence.

David, the psalmist, was an imperfect man. Like all of us, he preferred to not face his faults. When he committed adultery and murder, he tried to hide it. But when a godly friend confronted him, he owned his sin. Even more, he recognized that his sinful deeds came out of sinful roots in his heart. Behavioral change wasn't all that was required. A broken heart leading to repentance was necessary. (Read Psalm 51.)

**Reflection Question** (Ask throughout day 3.)

How am I obsessed with myself (my needs, my feelings, my convenience) right now . . .

- as I'm struggling with discouragement?
- as I'm handling this tension with my spouse or friend?
- as I'm anxious over what might happen?
- as I'm feeling disillusioned and bored with my church?

**Illustration of Purging Yourself of Whatever Blocks the Relationship**  
(Reflect and journal on the evening of day 3.)

Kyle is a Christian leader. He has been used by God to encourage and bless many people for many years. But Kyle is desperately insecure. He knows it and admits it to trusted friends, but he won't explore it. Because he's well respected and effective in ministry, he is able to convince himself that his insecurity is not a real problem.

His wife, Emily, leveled with him. After years of marriage, she admitted she doesn't feel safe with him and worries constantly that the next ministry conflict will tip him over the edge or drive him further into denial. She also told him their twenty-two-year-old son has said more than once that he sees his dad as a weak man, friendly and affirming, but unwilling to deal with tough stuff in their relationship. That got to him.

Kyle purges himself before God: “I’ve been afraid of rejection all my life. But I’ve found a way to win acceptance from people that has kept me from facing how determined I am to protect myself from rejection.

“God, I’ve always felt like a little boy nobody could want or respect. And enjoying the respect of influential people has become my first thing. Is that what’s really going on? What am I not seeing here, God? I want to see every way I value anything more than I value You. And I want to see how my terrified stubbornness keeps me from touching the hearts of the people I love most.”

In some way, your terror of being a weightless man who impacts no one deeply or an invisible woman whom no one sees and enjoys is affecting the way you relate. You’re determined to experience the satisfaction of feeling valued and wanted more than you’re determined to please God, to enjoy His worth, and to reach others with His life, no matter what they think of you.

Forget any self-improvement program.

Stop explaining why some people aren’t drawn to you by reminding yourself how insecure and narrow-minded they are.

See the depraved self-centeredness beneath your personal and relational struggles; don’t see yourself as a victim who needs to be understood.

Be open to the possibility that your strongest passions, even the “godly ones,” have less to do with God’s Spirit (who promotes God-obsession) than your flesh (the energy of self-obsession).

*Stand naked before holiness.*

The more you see your sin, the more you’ll be amazed by grace.



DAY 4:  
LEARNING TO APPROACH GOD AS THE  
“FIRST THING” IN YOUR LIFE

*Learning Objective*

Approach God with confidence that what He loves to give you is what you want the most.

Don't retreat from God when He seems unresponsive.

Don't negotiate with God. You have no leverage other than His relentless, tender love and your longing to get what He's giving.

Don't demand anything from God; expect the gift of relationship.

Don't let the desires that you feel dictate your expectations of what He'll give you.

*Stand before God as a loved child.*

Rest in His love as a prelude to receiving His best.

**Bible Passage** (Read first thing on day 4.)

I will heal their waywardness. I will love them lavishly. My anger is played out.

I will make a fresh start with Israel. He'll burst into bloom like a crocus in the spring.

He'll put down deep oak tree roots, he'll become a forest of oaks!

He'll become splendid—like a giant sequoia, his fragrance like a grove of cedars!

Those who live near him will be blessed by him, be blessed and prosper like golden grain.

Everyone will be talking about them, spreading their fame as the vintage children of God.

Ephraim is finished with gods that are no-gods. From now on I'm the one who answers and satisfies him.

I am like a luxuriant fruit tree. Everything you need is to be found in me.

If you want to live well, make sure you understand all of this.

If you know what's good for you, you'll learn this inside and out.

God's paths get you where you want to go. Right-living people walk them easily; wrong-living people are always tripping and stumbling. (Hosea 14:4–9 MSG)

*Key Point:* Everything you were designed to experience and enjoy is found in God. Knowing God is your life and your highest joy. You either believe that or you don't. Believe it and you will experience and enjoy life, real life, eventually. Guaranteed. Disbelieve it and, at best, you will experience counterfeit life and enjoy it only for a season.

These staggering promises from God are offered to people who repent. Read Hosea 14:1–3 for clear directions on what it means to repent. (Read Hosea 6:1–3 for an example of false repentance, where the people's focus is on their need for satisfaction, not their need for forgiveness.) Only when you present yourself authentically to God, attend to who He is, and purge yourself of self-obsession will you approach God to humbly and gratefully receive the greatest gift of all: a relationship with God as your Papa!

**Reflection Question** (Ponder throughout day 4.)

What does my heart most long for right now . . .

- as I enjoy time with my family and friends?
- as I wait for the lab report from my doctor?
- as I face criticism from colleagues?
- as I search for a better job?



### Illustration of Approaching God As Your “First Thing” (Reflect and journal on the evening of day 4.)

Sarah is eighty-four years old. She is a widow, living in a home for senior adults who need assistance with everyday living. Her one daughter is divorced, childless, and lives far away, both from Sarah and from the Lord.

Sarah has never known such loneliness. She cries every night in her small room. She pours out her heart to God; she sees Him as the holy God who is with her and promises the best is yet to come; and she is disgusted with how petty and impatient she can be at dinner with the other residents.

She approaches God: “I know You’re my Papa. I know You’re with me. It’s hard, Lord, harder than I ever imagined it would be. But I know Jesus is with You right now, and because I’m in Him, I’m with You too.

“And I know He’s praying for me, and You’re listening to every word. Some of His prayers are my cleaned-up words. So I come to You knowing You’re aware of every tear I cry, every ache in my heart.

“I come. I come to You, Papa, hoping You’ll take me home soon. But until You do, I come wanting every mountain that I can’t climb to be lowered so I can feel Your arms around me. And when I can’t feel them, I still come to You knowing You’re supplying the faith I need to believe I’m in good hands, the hope I need to go on, and the love I need to let all these old folks know what You’re like. Thank You, Papa. I know You’re giving it all to me, everything, life! I love You.”

Your circumstances are different from Sarah’s. For a few of you, they’re nearly identical. Many of you will one day know what Sarah is experiencing.

None of you is home. All of you live with desires that are not and cannot be satisfied. So stop living for satisfaction. Renounce your pursuit of comfort. Walk past the broken cisterns of this world and move toward the living water, toward God Himself.

Come to Him to get what He so loves to give—the first thing, the best thing—relationship with Himself. Enjoy all the second things in your life. Thank God for them. But never mistake them for life.

Approach God even when it seems He isn't there.

Stop offering God this if He'll do that. No bargaining with God.

Realize that if you demand fair treatment, you'll never see His face; if you live for second things, you'll not get to know God very well.

Trust no desire within you except your desire to know God.

*Stand before God as a loved child.*

Rest in His love as a prelude to receiving His best.

Approach God in writing. Write out your own prayer.

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That's the Four-Day Plan. Repeat it as often as you like, as often as it's helpful. Revise it any way that is both consistent with its purpose and helpful to you. Relate to others your struggles to learn the PAPA prayer, as well as your happy experiences of moving into closer relationship with God.

Follow the plan. Learn to pray the PAPA prayer. And you will discover the sound of your Father's voice. You will discover the life of God in your soul.