

## Scheduled to Pray

*“Pray always... Pray without ceasing.”*

The day was like so many days in my Day-Timer – busy. I had just interviewed for a new job and was offered an attractive and flattering contract. The boss had asked my wife and I to have dinner with them that Tuesday night. Monday was a full day of meeting with top brass and laying out the groundwork of this new position. We spent most of Tuesday on the road with a realtor looking for housing in the area. By five o'clock we were exhausted but elated that we were able to close a deal on the rental of a beautiful condo overlooking the Garden of the Gods, in Colorado Springs. As we passed one of our favorite restaurants my wife said, “Let’s celebrate!” So, famished, we sat down to an elegant meal at a fine restaurant. As the evening progressed we mused on the week’s events, we rejoiced in God’s goodness, we laid out plans for our move, and how to tell our church about our new decision, when all of a sudden a rush of panic hit me. “What day is today?” I asked with flushed face and bulging eyes. My wife said, “It’s Tuesday.” – “Oh no!” I suddenly remembered we had made arrangements to have dinner at the home of my new boss. I will never live down the embarrassment and humiliation of that moment and having to call my boss to explain my forgetfulness.

### What’s On Your Agenda?

An important item on all of our agendas is prayer – or so we say. Yet how many of us really schedule “God appointments” with the care and precision of a meeting with a new boss? God laments the forgetfulness of his own people in Jeremiah 2:32. *“Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet my people have forgotten me days without number.”* Unfortunately, it is not the occasional one-time appointment that we miss, but too often it is “days without number.” We prioritize our jobs, our careers, our families, our friends, and even our churches, but when do we prioritize our appointments with God? Do we even have marked appointments with him? It is very embarrassing to forget an important one-time meeting with your boss, but to frequently miss your appointment with the King of Kings says something about our priorities and first-love.

### A Prayer Timer

God must have first place, not in words or rhetoric but in reality. Appointments with him are really more important than any other meetings on our bulging Day-Timers, and over-filled calendars. Over the years I have learned (and continue to learn) that I must schedule in my appointments with God, just like any other important appointment. God is not to be the God of my leftovers. He is Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last. Let him be that in reality in my Day-Timer. Here are some of my yet imperfect calendared events with the Savior.

1. One hour each day – *“keeps the clutter away”*
2. Once a week – *“I sit at his feet”*
3. Every month a day away– *“get away to pray”*
4. Three days each quarter – *“put my life in order”*
5. One week each year – *“see my way clear”*
6. A Sabbath of seven – *“a time to yearn for heaven”*

**Now let me explain:**

These are not “the laws of the Medes and the Persians that cannot be changed,” but they are principles and personal guidelines I have covenanted before God for my personal life. Do I always fulfill my vows? No, too often I crowd out the Lover of My Soul with other apparent urgencies of life and ministry. But I continue to come back to these disciplines as goals for my prayer life. They are the hunger and thirst of my personal aspirations. They are the “*One thing I have desired, this will I seek after...*” (Psalm 27:4)

**An Hour a Day**

Jesus question to his weary disciples was, “*Could you not watch one hour?*” It echoes in my ears. I am sure the Lord does not have a chronometer running while we pray to see if we can pray for sixty minutes. But at the very least, one hour each day ought to be annexed from all other activity to give our attention and focus to the Lord. This may included my Bible reading, singing, journaling, and on-your-knees prayer time. The point is to spend unhurried time with God alone. Prayer is listening to God, and talking to God.

**Once a Week**

For me, Thursday works best. Often it is a half-day (or four hours) of fasting and prayer in which my morning until noon is spent in prayer time alone with God. Now obviously this is a pastoral discipline and cannot be practiced by the average working person. But it can be done by pastors, retired people, and people with flexible schedules. It could also be done as a four-hour period by anyone if you choose to use a Saturday or Sunday, or a week night of prayer. Again, I often use my 12-Step Prayer Plan to guide me and keep me focused during this time.

**Every Month a Day Away**

I look forward to a day each month as a prayer day. The entire day is dedicated to being alone with God in a place apart from my normal routine. It must be away from phones, books, and the clamor of routine duties. For me it has worked best at the end of each month, usually a Monday or Tuesday. I do not mind taking my day off to do this pleasurable task. A friend of mine goes to a university library and finds a quiet corner in which to read, pray, journal, and uses the campus to walk and worship. He also uses the day to evaluate his life and ministry according to a set pattern.

**Three Days Each Quarter**

I begin the year by marking these days on my calendar before anything else can crowd them out. These are days spent at a retreat center, camp, or other lonely place away from the daily bustle of activities. It is a time of great refreshing from the Lord. I spend huge amounts of time slowing down and being still before the Lord. Sometimes I spend the days with a group of people at a College of Prayer or a Prayer Summit, but much time is designated as time alone with God. I take along my prayer journal, my 12-Step Prayer Plan is essential, worship tapes and CDs, walking shoes, devotional readings on prayer, my Bible and verses to memorize. These days are the most precious day of my life.

**One Week Each Year**

A vacation with God is a great luxury. Few have ventured to do so. I learned at the feet of some Catholic brothers that a week of silence is a rare and rich thing to experience. So with great effort I try to give God a whole week during my summer. It can be a private camping trip. A week in a cabin, camp, or retreat center or monastery. Check with a friend to see if you

can borrow a cabin, cottage, condo, or camper. It needs to be scheduled and agreed upon with your spouse so as to avoid conflict. If you are of a mind to do so, make it a time of fasting or a modified fast.

### **A Sabbath of Seven** – *“a time to yearn for heaven”*

I have not personally done this step yet. It is a new goal that other spiritual sojourners have challenged me to do. Each of us must determine the amount of time necessary for a significant Sabbath Rest. For some a week is enough, others may choose two to three weeks. For still others it is a 40-day fast, done once in seven years. For others it is not a fast but a Sabbatical away for a month, a 30 day retreat for spiritual refreshing. You may find that you have to build up to this event with mini-pilgrimages of two weeks or three weeks. Forty days is a long time, and not many are spiritually disciplined enough to venture on such a marathon. Certainly you should not attempt a forty-day fast if you are not disciplined in short and prolonged fasts. Such extended prayer times requires great personal discipline to stick with it. Some have found it best to do this at monasteries where a spiritual mentor is your guide and you have the encouragement of other God-seekers around you.

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### **A Word to Pastors**

Prayer disciplines begin with you. Pastor, you are the cutting edge of your people's spirituality. You cannot expect them to go beyond what you have experienced of God. I have found that my people love to hear that I am praying for them. These are not just spiritual retreats but times of intercession and prevailing prayer for them. Bring your elders and governing boards into the loop of your prayer disciplines. In my quarterly retreats I like to announce to the congregation what I am doing and why, and I invite them to send me away with their most private personal prayer requests (signed or unsigned) that I might intercede on their behalf. You will find that you people appreciate having a praying pastor and a man after the heart of God. A successful prayer discipline will bring you great satisfaction and boldness in ministry, but a weak prayer life will leave you anemic and lacking in faith and vision. The men of Israel were required to appear before the Lord in Jerusalem three times per year. Should we do any less? Prioritize prayer and put the Lord on the throne of your Day-Timer.

### **A Word to Lay People**

Often average working people question how they can have a schedule of prayer retreats in their busy world of 5-6 days of work each week. Mothers ask how they can possibly get away with the responsibility of cooking and caring for their families. Where there is a will there is a way! I recommend you talk to your spouse about trading weekends from time to time so both of you can get away alone. I recommend that that at least three times during the year you schedule prayer days, just as you would any other appointment, conference, or retreat. Often employees get a three-day weekend. These are opportune moments to get away. Also you may try taking a Sunday afternoon and/or evening for prayer, or a Saturday night into Sunday for your time away. If your spouse is unwilling to share in the home care, perhaps you can find a friend who will take the kids for you while you go away, and you do the same for him/her. Don't try to do too much too soon. Begin small. Start with an afternoon and prayerfully move out from there. God will provide if your hunger and thirst is for righteousness. (*Matthew 6:33*)