

EXCERPT



The Possibility of Prayer
Finding Stillness with God in a Restless World

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The life of prayer is neither efficient nor productive, but it is transformative. As a pastor in Manhattan, John Starke knows the bustle and busyness of our society. But he also knows that prayer is not just for spiritual giants—prayer is for each of us. Here is an invitation to discover, via the church's ancient rhythms and with Starke's clear, practical guidance, the possibility of prayer.

Prayer is Not Just for the Spiritually Elite

For many, a life of prayer and spiritual depth is not for them. It's not that they do not desire it; it's that they believe it is out of reach. There've been too many false starts in their spiritual life. A lot of well-intentioned declarations of commitment that puttered to stalls and stops. Humming under the hood of the heart is the belief, A deep and satisfying prayer life is not for me. Do you believe that? I want you to know it's not true.

Someone once told me that when they hear others talk about a life of prayer, they often think about someone else, someone in their church who seems to have their spiritual life together. A deep and satisfying prayer life always seems to be out of reach and not for them. Here is what you should know and believe, and maybe what you should underline: A life of prayer, full of joy, power, and awe is for you. It's not for "other people." Prayer is not for the spiritually elite. It's for you.

Prayer is hard. I pastor a church in Manhattan, full of busy people. Busyness is the first obstacle to prayer that people mention. I once sat with a young mother who was a vice president at one of the major television networks in New York. She was working in a competitive field, and she had just given birth to her second child. The idea of spending time in prayer—something that she desired—seemed overwhelming and impossible. She also knew that entering into a busy world, with the pressures of family and vocation, without some spiritual life seemed impossible. But you don't need a baby or a highly demanding job to be tempted to push out prayer. Busyness is not a plague that only a few of us suffer from, it's the way of the world.

Busyness, however, isn't the deepest of our obstacles. Let's imagine we follow the instruction of the Psalms, "Be still and know that I am God." Just try it. Go ahead. Sit still. How long? Let's say ten minutes. Sit still for ten minutes and recognize his God-ness in your life—which means, that he's in control, not you, so you wait on him. Stillness. You don't conjure him up or manipulate what's going on; you seek to know him as God. Be still. Good luck.

If I sit still, I recognize how foreign this experience is to me. Normally if I sit still, it is to accomplish something: I'm emptying out my inbox, writing a letter, listening to someone else tell a story, reading, or being entertained. Stillness before God is different. In stillness, intolerable things begin to happen. One is guilt. Does that surprise you? It has surprised me in the past. An overwhelming sense that I ought to be doing something different, anything that is accomplishing something. Prayer doesn't seem to be accomplishing the immediate. I am not being effective nor efficient in prayer. It can seem like such a waste of time.

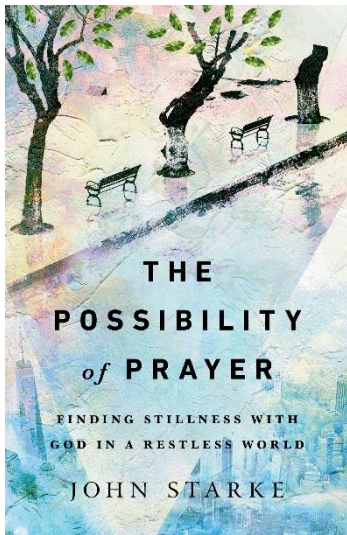
Anxiety then follows. Being active and busy is a good remedy for ignoring anxious thoughts. Fears get stuffed down by activity. When I'm still, I'm suddenly vulnerable to all the things I've swept under the rug for so long. The monsters of insecurities and shame come home to me during the stillness of prayer.



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We live in an age of efficiency. We judge our use of time by what we accomplish or produce. Anything we do that seems inefficient or unhurried is a waste of time. But our age of pathological efficiency has taught our hearts to resist any moments of quiet, unhurried time. We fear the judgment of using our time inefficiently. You cannot prove your worth by your quiet prayers in secret.

Do we find prayer useless because it's not useful? Maybe we've walked away from prayer and wondered, *Was that a good use of my time? Could I have gotten something done instead of praying? Do my prayers accomplish anything?* The Bible challenges our utilitarianism. The prayers in the Psalms use words of waiting, watching, listening, tasting and seeing, meditating, and resting. It's remarkable how inefficient these actions are. They aren't accomplishing anything. There isn't a product on the other side of these prayerful actions. Yet, over the years they bring steadfastness, joy, life, fruitfulness, depth of gratitude, satisfaction, wonder, an enlarged heart, feasting, and dancing.

We cannot merely say that the psalmist's life was just a different age. "Theirs was the life of pasture and ours is modern and metropolitan." The church's greatest examples of prayer and meditation are from King David—a man leading a start-up nation—or the prophet Elijah, who was often running for his life. Even St. Augustine lived a very active life as a bishop in the large and bustling town of Hippo, North Africa, in the fourth century. His life was full of regular pastoral duties, travel, theological controversies, and the constant threat of military invasion from enemies. Even more, in a span of forty years, his writing output would equal a thick three hundred-page book a year. And yet, he maintained that this resulted from long and regular times of prayer and solitude with God.

A deeper look into biblical patterns of prayer and ancient rhythms of solitude reveals an overwhelming witness that the contemplative life is not just for the hermit, the priest, or the desert monk, but for the banker, the mother, and the artist. In fact, the contemplative life is for all of life, for every vocation, and for every village, town, and city.

What the ancients tell us is that we cannot merely look for "best practices." Life and practice go together. Our lives must be considered. We are embodied creatures who have been formed to believe and live in such a way that enforces false assumptions about ourselves, the world, and God. Our spending habits, what we consume, or our relationship to work shapes our inner life. We fool ourselves if we think our media consumption does not affect our prayer lives.

Communion, meditation, solitude, fasting and feasting, Sabbath rest, and corporate worship are regular pathways and rhythms of a life of prayer. What does the Bible say about them and how has the Church practiced them throughout history? The rhythms of our world do not make space for these habits, and we are in danger of being formed by our calculating age of technique and efficiency rather than the quiet Voice that forms us when we are still with him.

Prayer is as complex as life. It's hard and beautiful. Prayer is the primary way Christians have an experiential grasp of God's promise to be present with his people. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." (Psalm 81:10 ESV). Prayer is the daily habit of opening your mouth wide for all the fullness of God.

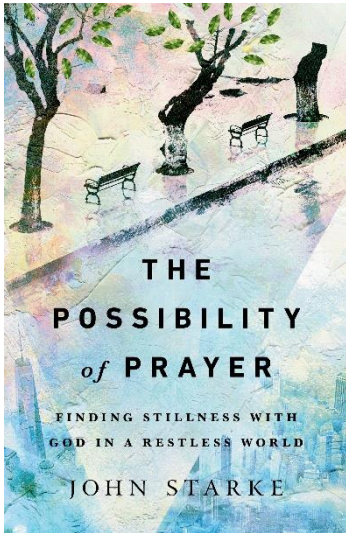
—Adapted from the introduction



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Q & A



The Possibility of Prayer *Finding Stillness with God in a Restless World*

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John Starke is the lead pastor at Apostles Church Uptown in New York City. He is the coeditor (with Bruce Ware) of *One God in Three Persons*. He lives in Manhattan with his wife and four children.

Prayer Is Not Just for Spiritual Giants

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What do most people really think about prayer?

John Starke: As a pastor, I regularly talk to people about prayer and their life of intimacy with God. What I came to hear over and over is that for most people, they believe that a vibrant life of prayer seemed wonderful but likely reserved for elite kinds of Christians. I long for people to understand how the Bible explains that a vibrant prayer life is available for them.

What do you hope to convey in *The Possibility of Prayer*?

John: Christians know prayer is important and they even desire to have a rich and meaningful life of prayer, but as our world becomes faster and more "efficient," a prayer life can begin to seem impractical or maybe even a waste of time. For many, a still heart seems reserved for the spiritually elite. And yet, a deeper look into biblical patterns of prayer reveal an overwhelming witness that the life of prayer is not just for the hermit, the priest, or the desert monk, but for the banker, the mother, and the artist. In fact, prayer is for all of life, for every vocation, and for every village, town, and city. The witness of Christian history is that you need a quiet heart for ambitious living.

What do you want readers to know about prayer?

John:

- Prayer is not possible because we have somehow made ourselves worthy of God's attention but because God has made himself known to us.
- Our culture has created in us a reactionary heart, responding fearfully to circumstantial change, but prayer creates a deeper heart responding to love.
- God invites us into the world of the Psalms that allows us to speak honestly and humanly toward God.



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