

CHAPTER SIX

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD

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How is it possible to maintain faith in a secular world, the kind of faith that will result in successful outreach to secularly-minded people? The place to start is in the devotional life. It is the devotional life that provides the derived seclusion from the secular environment that allows one's spiritual life to flourish. It involves coming apart from the world every day for some time with the Lord. As we noticed earlier it is weakness in the devotional life that is the first step on the road of secular drift. It causes one to wonder why we don't spend more time in devotion, why the devotional lives of so many Adventists are not more energizing than they are.

We tend to live very noisy lives. Even pastors spend their lives running from one thing to another, from one idea to another; from one situation to another; from one

emergency to another. And if it is like that in the pastor's study, it is usually even worse at the conference office. We need desperately to slow down. We need desperately to reflect. We need desperately to take stock. I am contending here that this is our greatest need. If you do not have a living relationship with God, please don't try to reach secular people. If you are as secular as the person you are trying to reach, you are on the same spiritual level. Like cannot elevate like. You cannot help a secular person to find God if you do not know Him for yourself. Now it may be that in helping someone else search for God, you might find Him for yourself. So don't turn down opportunities to witness. But never try to develop a radical, secular-style ministry if you do not have a living relationship with God. It will not work.

Those ministers, evangelists and church members who do win secular people succeed because they have a living relationship with God even when they are not aware of the best methods available. When I was pastoring in New York City in the late seventies and early eighties, I remember a place called Living Springs, a self-supporting institution that may have had little idea of the kinds of concepts discussed in this book, but they loved the Lord and somehow, in their special way, they succeeded in reaching selected secular people that nobody

else was reaching. I once sent a hardened street kid up there to deal with some substance abuse problems, and although he was somewhat critical because they seemed out of touch with life as he knew it, he nevertheless decided to commit himself to Christ and the church because of the spiritual warmth and familial atmosphere of the place. A living walk with God is certainly a basic asset in anyone seeking to reach secular people. Secular ministry must begin in the devotional room.

In what follows I would like to offer a number of practical suggestions that have helped me to maintain and develop a living walk with God in the face of the inevitable dangers of secular drift. These suggestions are not primarily gained from the reading of books, but from personal experimentation and trial. They are offered not as a cut-and-dried formula that everyone must follow, but rather as a smorgasbord of ideas from which the reader can pick and choose as may seem appropriate in his or her individual circumstances.

The Study Life

It is absolutely essential to Christian experience that the devotional life center on the key issues that affect a person's everyday experience. To be devotionally useful, reading must be relevant to present experience, to things that matter in practical terms. Our study lives

need to be centered on things that matter. What are the greatest concerns and needs in your life? To center study on matters of lesser concern would certainly be a mistake. Genealogies and prophecies may be of intense intellectual interest, but they may not offer practical guidance for the issues of the household, the workplace, and the neighborhood.

Since a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ is the most relevant of all spiritual concerns, I would like to suggest that devotional study needs to focus on Jesus. He needs to be the very center of our study life. To illustrate in terms of the writings of Ellen White, I have found it helpful to limit myself devotionally to the books in the Conflict Series (the five books that cover the broad scope of the Biblical story, running from *Patriarchs and Prophets* to *The Great Controversy*) and to the Jesus books. By Jesus books I mean those which center on the life and teachings of Christ, such as *Christ's Object Lessons*, *The Ministry of Healing*, *Steps to Christ*, and *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*. In fact, at one time they were all going to be part of the book *Desire of Ages* but it just got too big. So Ellen White divided the material into a book on the life of Christ, a book that focused on His healing ministry, a book on the Sermon on the Mount, a book about the parables of Jesus and a book that focused on practical living. My personal favorite for devotions is a toss-up between *Christ's Object*

Lessons and Ministry of Healing. The first hundred and last hundred pages of *Ministry of Healing* are, in my opinion, the very best that Ellen White ever wrote. As we focus on Jesus, our devotional life will be energized. The best place to develop a relationship with God is to learn to know Jesus.

The amazing thing to me is that, even in our devotional life, we have a tendency to set secular goals. For example, when I started out in my devotional life, I would say to myself, "Let's see how many pages I can read in the next hour." In devotional reading, the most important thing is to discern God's voice to you personally, not to accomplish the task of completing a certain amount of pages, or mastering a certain amount of information. If it takes a whole hour to meditate on one sentence, so be it. The devotional life is not the time and place to rush. Take your time; go no further or faster than you are able to understand what you've been reading. Allow the reading to sink in--let it impact in the very core of your being.

In the process of devotional study, I have found it helpful to have some kind of place where you write down the insights that God gives you as part of your devotional experience. The reason for this is that people forget what they don't write down. If you are really into

the computer age, it may even work well to have a laptop computer at your side as you work through your devotions. I remember a couple of occasions where my heart was so filled with joy and insight that I grabbed the laptop and spent more than an hour recording insights that I have treasured ever since. The new generation may find laptops a more relevant way to maintain faith than to use a mode (paper and pencil) that is increasingly foreign to the rest of their lives.

I would not limit devotional note taking, however, to the spiritual insights that result from one's reading. I have found it extremely meaningful to spend time with what I call a "spiritual diary." Most of us live "unreflective lives," we rarely stop to think, "What am I really doing from day to day? Does it make any real difference in the world? Am I sensitive to the Lord's leading? Is my work effective for the Lord? How am I raising my children? Was I the kind of father I wanted to be yesterday, or were there some real flaws in the way I dealt with my children? What are my most important needs right now? How would God want me to meet them?"

Most of us take very little time to reflect on our lives. But the fact of the matter is, if you don't keep score of your life you will repeat the same errors over and over again. At times

when I have neglected my spiritual diary, I can go three to four weeks and not even be aware that I have been exhibiting a nasty temper around the house, for example. Without regular self-examination, you drift into counter-productive behaviors with the same ease that you drift into secularism. If every day we would take time to sit down and reflect on the previous day and say, "Did I give glory to God?," there would be an amazing growth of self-awareness. We would begin to see things in ourselves that everyone who knows us can see, but we are blinded to ourselves. (Perhaps someone should write a book entitled *All the Things You Ever Wanted to Know About Yourself--But Were Afraid to Ask*.) To write down these things in a diary and to meditate on them is to learn how to see oneself the way God sees us.

Virtually all the great spiritual giants, like Wesley, Luther, and Ellen White, kept diaries most of their lives and they are filled with little tidbits of how God had helped them to understand themselves and the world in which they accomplished work for God. God may impress us that we didn't handle a particular situation very well the previous day; a letter or word of apology may be in order. Or it may become evident that a child or spouse has not received the kind of attention that they need, and a reorienting of schedule is in order. Or you may become aware that feelings of bitterness related to home or business are

undermining your usefulness as a Christian. A spiritual diary is probably the best way to prevent oneself from drifting into unproductive behaviors.

Since we live in the hurry-up world of the information age, it will benefit some to discover a marvelous side-effect to the keeping of a spiritual diary. When we stop and reflect upon our lives, the workaholic atmosphere most of us live in day by day begins to calm down. Although it may take 45 minutes to an hour, the brain waves slow perceptibly from the usual 10,000 RPMs down to idle. It really works. Taking the time to reflect on the past 24 hours and on what God is doing in your life can really stop you in your tracks. Of course, you are probably thinking, "Who's got an hour? I certainly don't." I would be the first to admit that I struggle with the issue of time, but there are no spiritual substitutes for reading and reflection. Although they take precious time, they are worth every minute.

A Life of Prayer

The prayer life is certainly an area of great difficulty for most Adventists in a secular age. I would like to share some ideas in this area, not in terms of a right way or a wrong way to maintain a meaningful prayer life, but in terms of practices that have helped me a great

deal. If you have found a better way to commune effectively with God, praise the Lord for it. And by all means share it around--I too will be eager to listen. But if your prayer life is not what you would like it to be--and the general silence that usually sets in when I talk about prayer publicly indicates to me that it is an area of great concern for most Adventists--let me share with you what has helped me.

The attitude in prayer has varied through the ages. By attitude I mean whether or not you are on your knees, whether your eyes are open or shut, whether you fold your hands or put them behind your back, or raise them up in the air. These kinds of things are more cultural than they are specified in terms of God's absolute will. When it comes to prayer, I am a pragmatist--if it works, use it. A careful look at the prayers described in the Bible indicate that there is no one right prayer attitude, God is interested above all else in communicating with us, so whatever aids that process is a blessing.

You may not have the same difficulties in prayer that I do, but I find that when I close my eyes and pray silently, my mind wanders almost instantly. I have no idea what causes it, but the minute I close my eyes and try to pray, my mind is off in all kinds of directions and fifteen minutes later I realize that I have been in another universe for fifteen minutes. I

sometimes totally forget that I am in prayer. If I didn't know that many people have the same problem, I would probably be reluctant to discuss this in a public way. But if you can relate to my problem I am glad to report that I also have a solution. The solution for me is to pray with my eyes open! To me that has made all the difference. And frankly, if you read the Bible carefully, you'll discover that many people prayed with their eyes open. Even Jesus is described as lifting up His eyes to Heaven when He prayed (John 11:41). If you have difficulty focusing your mind in silent prayer I would suggest that you find a special prayer location and then focus your eyes on a particular spot. It could be the carpet, or the pattern in the material of a couch, or it could even be a picture of Jesus. Whatever it is seems less important than having a focal point. I find that a visual focal point helps me to concentrate my thoughts and direct them to God. If something else works for you, that is fine, but I have found that when I close my eyes, it doesn't work. In a media age, we may all need some help in developing our ability to concentrate.

Another thing that is very helpful is to write out one's prayers. It is amazing what the process of writing does to help concentrate your mind on the reality of being in the act of prayer. Take a notebook, and a pencil or a pen, and sit down and construct a carefully worded

prayer to God. Some computer wizards may again find a notebook computer the most relevant way to do this.

Let me illustrate the importance of the writing process to the way people focus on a task. I have made it a personal policy never to accept a major speaking appointment without a written letter of invitation. I do this because I have found that when I have only a verbal agreement over the phone all kinds of things go wrong. I can arrive in a place only to discover that the people who invited me had completely forgotten the appointment. But selective memory can be even more embarrassing. On one occasion I was asked to be the speaker for a college graduation overseas. The contact person kept calling and calling and calling. Against my better judgment--because I was going to be there anyway--I accepted the appointment. Despite repeated requests, he never wrote me a letter, never communicated in writing. When I arrived for the graduation ceremony, he discovered that he had not ordered an academic robe for me. Everybody from the President on down was wearing the typical robes, all except the speaker! Why? Because the contact person never thought of it. If he had sat down to write me a letter, he would have had to think, "Well, what do we each need to do for this thing to work out? Can the speaker bring his robe, or do we need to order one

for him?"

Shortly after that a conference official in the United States called me five times over a period of fifteen months to try to get me to come to a workers' meeting, and I said every time, "Write me a letter." I refused to agree to a date without him taking the time to put it in writing. Finally, Andrews University gave me an excuse to play "hardball" with him. I said, "We have a new policy at the University, you have to write the President and ask him for permission to talk to me." Only then did the letter finally get written. In terms of focusing the mind on the full implications of a task or request there is no substitute for sitting down to write. Many of the spiritual greats throughout the ages have written out their prayers, and it is now possible to read them. Many of the Psalms in the Bible are written prayers. Godly people sat down and wrestled to formulate what they wanted to share with God. The most important things in life are worthy of that level of attention.

Whatever the method or the attitude in prayer it is important that our inner prayer life focus on the things in life that matter the most to us. One reason that prayer may seem irrelevant to everyday life is that the crucial elements of everyday life are not brought forward to God while in the attitude of prayer. Discuss with God the very things that the journal has

revealed are of utmost concern to you at a given time. Share with Him the events of the previous day. Share your concerns about the implications of those events. If the only prayer you know how to pray is in behalf of the missionaries and colporters all over the world, etc., your prayers may border on the vain repetition that Jesus warned about in Matt 6.

Prayer at the devotional level needs to touch base with the deepest needs of life. We can tell God the things that we cannot tell our spouse, or even a psychiatrist. What better person to unburden your heart to than to Someone who knows all about you already and yet loves you just the same. Psychology has a role to play in helping many Christians deal with life's major issues, but psychology WITH prayer is even more effective than prayer or psychology alone.

While you have a pad in front of you to write out your prayer, why not let God answer the prayer? I find it amazing how rarely I give God the opportunity to answer my prayers. So often my prayer life goes something like this, "Dear Lord, I'm busy today so I'll have to be quick. These are the things that bother me, I hope you know about so-and-so, be with the missionaries and colporters, blah, blah, blah! OK! Gotta run now. Amen!"

It reminds me of my well-known friend, Sam Bacchiocchi, the world's most lovable

Italian. I'll never forget the time that I called him to get a "yes" or "no" answer to a question. He picked up the phone and I said, "Sam, this is Jon Paulien." "Oh, I'm so glada you called! I wanna tell you abouta my new book. It's a book about da Sabbath. A wonderful book about da Sabbath. In backa you finda these Sabbath recipes, Mama Mia, my wife she make a lasagna like-a you wouldn't believe, you gotta have these recipes and give them to alla your friends. . . ." He went on for 15 minutes like this and then all of a sudden said, "Well, I won't take up any more of your time. Goodbye." Click. I had to dial the phone again and say, "Sam, I have a question for you."

Now I like Sam--we are friends. And he wouldn't be half as much fun if he tried to change his personality. But I mention this incident to illustrate that we often don't let God get a word in edgewise. Try this sometime. When you have finished praying, stay on your knees. Pull the pad in front of you, pick up your pencil and wait. You have put yourself in tune with God, you have examined your life, you have grasped a clearer picture of Jesus in your devotions. You have talked to God about the things that matter most. You have asked for His presence with you. You are now in a position to receive. So write down whatever comes to mind. Sometimes the thoughts that come may seem silly. But do not try to evaluate

them at once, treat it as spiritual brain-storming. As a result of this kind of activity, there have been times when God has planned my whole day. Someone will come to mind--"Oh, yeah! I haven't thought about that person in weeks. Maybe I should give him a call--see how he's doing. Or maybe I should drop by and visit." The exciting thing is that when I carry out these impressions, I find that the contact came at just the right moment, just when it was needed. God is willing and eager to guide us day by day.

I believe that this is an element we have lost somewhat as Adventists. We have a relatively intellectual and secular religion. We know about God, we talk about God, we talk about the Bible, but when do we really talk to God and let God talk to us? When do we let God speak to our personal needs? When do we let Him speak to our hearts? When do we let Him guide our lives? I realize that there is potential danger in this. I am well aware that impressions can come from the devil. But I also know that a person who has walked with God for twenty years can gradually learn to know God's voice as opposed to other voices. After all, didn't Jesus indicate that his "sheep" would know and follow His voice? (John 10:4,5,14-16,26,27)

The only way to explain the incident in which Abraham was commanded to sacrifice

his son Isaac is that God knew Abraham would recognize who it was that was speaking to him. The command was directly contrary to Scripture. If Abraham had been an Adventist he would have ignored the voice because it spoke contrary to Scripture. But Abraham wasn't an Adventist so he went ahead anyway. Why? Because he knew it was God's voice. How did he know? Because he had been talking to Him for years. Gradually he learned to distinguish God's voice from other voices and from the voices of his own natural desires.

This is the kind of relationship God wants to have with each of us, a living and active relationship. It is also the kind of relationship that will move a secular person out of his or her world. One reason that Adventists seem less effective at reaching secular people than many other Christians is because we have become secularized ourselves. As a result we have a hard time elevating secular people to an experience that we ourselves do not have. People will not sacrifice the trappings of secular existence for anything less than a living faith that is self-evidently superior to what they already have.

The great tragedy of Adventism is that not only are we secular ourselves, but we are enmeshed in a religious language and culture that is totally foreign to secular people. We are secular, yet we have great difficulty communicating with secular people. What a tragedy!

Lost in both worlds! Missing in action on both counts. And more and more of us are saying that it just is not worth the trouble anymore. The fact that many of our best and brightest no longer see anything worth clinging to in Adventism compels me to appeal that it is not too late. We can learn how to get our own spiritual house in order. And then we can learn how to communicate with secular people. As we do both and in the proper order, we will reclaim many who have dropped out, along with many others who will find a spiritual home for the first time.

There is one final aspect to prayer that I would like to emphasize. In a busy and depressing world, I often need to take time for some "thank therapy." There are times when the only way to maintain a positive attitude in life is to spend some intentional and planned time every day thanking the Lord for what He's done for me. I learned about this from the ministry of Glenn Coon. He suggested, "Take some time every morning to write down ten things that you're thankful for." The goal is to pray through this list from time to time throughout the day as needed. He underlined the importance of making this exercise as practical as possible. "Thank you Lord for the color of the carpet, thank you Lord for Ponderosa Pines (my candidate for the most beautiful tree in the universe), thank you Lord

for the raccoon that went by my window yesterday, thank you Lord for the air." Did you ever thank God for air? Where would you be without it? If God ever quit on the job and didn't stock up the air supply, where would you be? And if you feel so depressed that you can't come up with ten things to be thankful for, I have a solution for you: get out a dictionary--it's loaded with gifts of God. Just open any page and you will find them; apes, apples, apricots, and so on. When was the last time you thanked the Lord for those things?

Yes I know, this sounds like the most childish thing you have ever heard. But I want you to know something--it works. The Bible says, "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh 8:10). The best way to find the joy of the Lord is through a spirit of gratitude and praise. One of the greatest chapters in all of Ellen White's writings, in my opinion, is the chapter called "Mind Cure" in *Ministry of Healing*, from pages 240-260. The basic thrust of that chapter is that a spirit of gratitude and praise is the key to curing the mind of its ills.

We are all sick in some aspect of our mental and emotional experience. We are just beginning to learn about co-dependency--how if you grew up with an alcoholic or an abusive parent, you will have problems that are related to alcoholism. You may not drink, you may not smoke, instead you exercise the addictive tendencies in a way that is more socially

acceptable. It is OK to become a workaholic, or a football-holic, or even a sugar-holic. Some even exercise addictive tendencies in their church relationships. I have known many emotionally unhealthy churches. We are all sick to some degree as a result of the sin problem, but to recognize our condition is the first step on the road to recovery. One of the most effective pathways to recovery is to thank God everyday for the many benefits He showers on our lives everyday. "Thank you, Lord, for the air that we're breathing. Thank you, Lord, for that carpet, the floor would be quite uncomfortable without it." It is at this practical level that the secular person can see in Christian experience something that is worth making major life changes for.

A strong devotional life, then, serves two purposes for the Christian struggling to cope with the issues related to life in the secular world. It serves to maintain and strengthen the basic faith relationship with God, and it provides an attractive way of life which can stimulate in secular people an interest in spiritual things. The great interest in the bizarre aberrations of the New Age demonstrates the tremendous hunger secular people have for a living relationship with God.

Facing Problems

How can we find time for devotions in the midst of the crushing load of responsibility most of us bear? This is a question I have certainly faced on a repeated basis throughout my Christian experience. Few people have the time to accomplish all that they expect to accomplish in a day. Ultimately it is up to us to decide what is truly worth our time and what is not.

What has helped me more than any other concept of time management is the concept of the "news-hole" mentioned by John Naisbitt in the original book Megatrends. He describes how American military intelligence learned more about German capacities and intentions by subscribing to the local newspapers in Germany than by any other means. The reason for this is that local newspapers are priority and interest-driven. Each paper has a "news-hole" or space devoted to news that is of a fixed size for each issue. Articles are prioritized in two ways. The most important article is top front on the first page, the least important is buried somewhere near the back. Paragraphs within each article are also prioritized in order of importance, the last paragraph being the least crucial to the story. If a new story comes in at the last minute and is of top priority, the news hole is not expanded. Instead all articles are

bumped down in location and space is created either by dropping the least important article, by cutting the bottom paragraphs out of several articles, or by some combination of the above. The news hole never expands, therefore, whatever is found in the local paper is considered of top priority in interest and importance to the local community.

Our use of time is a lot like that news hole. When new activities clamor for involvement, it is crucial to realize that you can't add anything to life without taking something else away. When I decided to take Ph.D. studies I realized that I was adding a huge drain on my time. My life would become impossibly complex unless I consciously chose to eliminate some major things from my life. I chose to drop playing the organ and the watching of spectator sports. I have taken a lot of flak over the former one, but I determined that I could not be an excellent organist and an excellent Bible scholar at the same time I was raising a family. To have tried to do both would have squeezed my family out of my "news hole" by default. I rated my family and my doctoral program as of greater interest and importance than music and sports.

The problem is that most people prefer not to make such choices. They seek to accomplish everything that is set before them (expand the news hole!), and it just does not

work. Inevitably, either the family or the devotional life or both are sacrificed on the altar of indecision. Whenever someone asks me to take an office or perform a task these days, I ask myself the question, "What activity will this replace? Is this more important or interesting than what I will have to give up in order to do this?" Life is a choice. If we don't choose time will choose for us. And we will be unhappy with the choice.

All this has large implications for the devotional part of life. Our time with God is often crowded out by the press of lesser concerns. If we don't choose to spend the best part of every day with God, we will inevitably drift in a secular direction. So the first step in enhancing our devotional experience is to choose to make it a front page priority in our lives. The danger of secular drift should motivate us to make our time with God the headline event of the day. The great thing about will power is that it is strengthened by use. Choose to put God first. Say it out loud. Write about it to your friends. Expressing that choice will make the choice stronger.

Another step that has helped me is to make a plan. Decide what in your life needs to go if your devotional experience is to grow. Be careful about adding new assignments or responsibilities. Particularly important are the time and place where devotions occur. Some

office workers have found that the only way they can carve out time to spend with the Lord is to go in an hour early to the office. They get there before anybody else gets there, lock the door, put a sign out "Do Not Disturb", and spend some time with God. For some the time saved by avoiding rush hour traffic may be greater than the time spent in devotion.

Whatever venue you prefer, it should be chosen to minimize the possibility of interruption if at all possible. Early in the morning is the best for most people, particularly if no one else in the family is awake yet. For many families, however, there are no easy solutions. I have a ten-year old, a six-year old, and a four-year old, and when they hear me getting up, they like to come and see what is happening. Some of you can relate to that. A very positive thing that has happened recently is that the ten-year-old has decided to follow my example and spend the first part of every day in "devotions." I am hoping that it is possible to create a family habit, where each member of the family co-operates with the others to create the kind of environment in which devotions can take place.

At times, however, I get up, shower, eat, dress and get to the office before any secretary, teacher, or student arrives, then lock myself in that office until my time with God is over. Perhaps other options may work for you. Maybe there's a room over your garage

where you can be left undisturbed--H. M. S. Richards did that. Whatever your specific solution, it is critical to create a regular time and place. If we don't intentionally create a time and a place, circumstances will see to it that we never get around to devotions. Life is so driven these days, one can even find phones on airplanes now. Isn't that disgusting? Right now it is only possible to call out, and I make sure I don't use it. But when people can start calling you on an airplane, there will be no place to hide anymore.

Every Christian needs a time and a place for seclusion. That includes pastors and conference officials. It is not fair to think that a pastor or conference officer should give you immediate and full attention just because you happened to think of a problem in the last minute. We all need to create space and time to spend with the Lord. And sometimes the only way to do it is to make some hard choices regarding the way we deal with people during that time. Such choices won't make you popular, they may even cause others to think of you as cold, unfeeling, or "uppity." "He has no time for the little people any more." Although the choices are difficult, they are necessary if we wish to avoid the inevitable slide into secular modes of thinking and living.

I realize that planning is easier for some people than for others. If your personality is of the type that prefers to hang loose most of the time, you may need to enlist some help along the way. Counsel with a friend or a pastor who has good planning skills. Invite family and friends to help you arrange your schedule in order to make God first in your life. Consult with those in your job situation about alternative schedules and/or pay arrangements that free up extra time. Invite God to assist you in this process.

Perhaps more helpful than anything else is accountability. Accountability means that you make a covenant with a trusted friend or family member who will help you stick to your plan. Everyone needs a "hard-nosed" friend who is not afraid to look you in the eye and say, "I'm concerned about where your life is going right now." My idea of a hard-nosed friend would be someone who cares too much not to tell the truth. Someone who will call you at 7:17 every morning to ask if you did your devotions that morning as planned. Someone who isn't afraid to chew you out now and then so that you can achieve in life what matters most to you. Without friends like that none of us would know when we were slipping. Invite that friend to monitor your devotional life, your time spent watching TV, your use of money, whatever stands in the way of achieving your goals. Accountability provides strength when we have little strength, and focus when we have a hard time getting focused. Some

combination of the above ideas has helped me whenever my devotional life slips.

What if you spend significant time each day with God and nothing seems to be happening? Your prayers seem to go no higher than the ceiling? First of all, know that every Christian has times like that. Don't pretend that things are going well if they are not, just keep on studying and praying. Adam Clarke, the author of one of the classic Bible commentary sets, went through a two-year dry spell in which his devotional life was absolutely empty. Two years! But he stuck with it. And when he came out at the other end, he was a much richer person for having gone through that struggle. Even Jesus experienced a dry spell in His relationship with God in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet that was no reflection on the reality of His walk with His Father.

The problem is that when things are going well devotionally, when we feel that we have our act together spiritually, we tend to become judgmental of the spiritual experience of other people. "We have our act together, what's wrong with them?" Sometimes the Lord allows us to struggle so that we have sympathy with the struggles of others. If we are elders in the church we need to have mercy on the little ones and realize that if it is a struggle for us, it may be ten times more difficult for them. So the Lord will let you have dry experiences now and then. But keep with the program, the devotional life is the bottom line, whether or

not you feel good about it. There will be days when you skip it, days when you sleep in, days when some emergency comes up, these things happen. But if it happens, get back with the program again the next day and go on. Having said this, it is still important to place the devotional life within a larger context. Those who have struggled long and hard in the Christian walk are well aware that a spiritual life that is restricted to the devotional room soon grows stale unless worked out in concrete, everyday action. We turn now to the kind of practical, everyday lifestyle that is crucial to faith maintenance and development in a secular age.