

# BROKEN + BLESSED

The following is an excerpt from Chapter 7 of Fr. Josh Johnson's new book,

## *BROKEN AND BLESSED*

### PRAYER AND THE "FIVE W'S"

Throughout this book, as we have been seeing how to walk with one another in receiving the love of Jesus in and through his Church, there has been a common thread—namely, encountering God in prayer. To help us be more intentional in our relationship with Jesus, I would like to propose a method that may be familiar to many writers and journalists: "The Five W's"—when, where, what, who, and why. This approach is not a divine mandate or a Church "rule" that we must follow. It is simply a method that works for me and that has also helped many other people in their walk toward eternity.

Every Sunday, I look at my calendar for the coming week and ask myself the following questions, each of which starts with one of the "Five W's":

1. **When** will I spend intentional time with Jesus from Monday to Sunday? Once I figure this out, I pencil in the exact prayer times on my calendar.
2. **Where** will I spend this intentional time with Jesus? I then note the locations on my calendar. While the actual location does not necessarily matter, it is important to find some places where you pray consistently.
3. **What** will Jesus and I "do" together during this time? That is, what type(s) of prayers or devotions. I then pencil them in.
4. **Who** will hold me accountable for spending this time with Jesus? I then invite him or her to check in with me via email, text, call, or a personal visit.

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5. **Why** am I spending this time with Jesus? We need to know why we are praying for us to be consistent and persevering in prayer.

Now, let's take a look at each of the "**Five W's**":

### When

Finding the right time to encounter God is very important. St. Bernard of Clairvaux says, "Anyone who wishes to pray must choose the right time." The "right time" is different for each of us, and this time can certainly change depending on the circumstances of our lives. In the Scriptures, Jesus spent intentional time with God the Father throughout each day, in the morning, afternoon, evening, and night. So any time of day is a sacred opportunity for nurturing and sustaining our living, personal relationship with God.

In my time as a priest helping people grow in their intentional relationships with Jesus, I have had many share with me that morning is the best time for them to pray. Though not everyone is a "morning person," depending on one's state of life, morning might be the most uninterrupted time of the day. St. Bernard acknowledges that, although it is not possible for everyone, "the deep silence when others are asleep is particularly suitable for prayer." When I have scheduled time for intimacy with Jesus in the afternoon, it sometimes doesn't happen because of unexpected interruptions. The same is true for night: My mind is often filled with so many distractions from the day that I can hardly focus on Jesus' love for me and the Church. Hence, if morning at all works, I would encourage you to try and spend intentional time with our Lord right after you wake up. Praying in the morning first thing can help you avoid having your prayer time interrupted—or even prevented entirely—later in the day.

I wake up every day very early to pray. When I first began getting up so early, it was a struggle. In the beginning, more often than not, I would hit the snooze button on my alarm and choose to pray later. Of course, spending any substantial time with Jesus later in the day never happened due to unexpected interruptions and distractions. To avoid hitting snooze, I decided to put my smartphone on the other side of the room so that I would have to physically get out of bed to

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turn it off. Once I conquered the first battle of the morning, a new one came in the form of distractions.

The battle of distractions was fought with my smartphone. After I turned my alarm off, I was instinctively drawn to check my text messages and emails. Now, my mind was filled with the distracting texts and emails, and it was very difficult to focus on what I needed to receive from God in prayer. Eventually, I made the decision not to check my messages or emails until after I had spent one-on-one time with Jesus. Nonetheless, I still found it difficult to focus on God first thing in the morning. I began to wonder if I was trying to be a martyr about this, whether I was being too hard on myself. After all, though I was super tired, I was making an effort to spend time with Jesus. I then had an important realization: Maybe my “super” tiredness was a result of going to bed too late. When I started going to bed earlier, I found it much easier—even a joy—to wake up in the morning and spend time in prayer with Jesus.

So the first thing I would invite you to do is to look on your calendar and determine set times to pray. Again, it doesn't have to be in the morning. Though I have found morning to work well for my prayer life, all of us are different. When you discern what times are best for you to pray, write it on your calendar. Whether your prayer time is ten, fifteen, or thirty minutes—or even an hour—any consistent time spent with Jesus is time well spent. If unexpected things happen in your day that take you away from this sacred time of prayer, don't worry. The intention to prioritize Jesus on the calendar is a step in the right direction and a consolation to his heart.

## Where

Regarding the importance of location for prayer, St. Bernard of Clairvaux writes, “Anyone who wishes to pray must choose the right place.” One of the most common places people pray is in their car or on the bus on the way to or from work. As a priest, much of my time is spent in my car, and I regularly use this time for speaking with and listening to God. Many people pray the Rosary while traveling to work or school. There are a fair amount of distractions when driving, though. After all, we need to pay attention to the road and the cars around us. So, while I

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recommend praying in the car or on the bus, this should not be the only place we pray if we want to cultivate a deeper, authentic intimacy with the Lord.

For some, a church or Adoration chapel might be the sacred space that is most conducive for them to encounter Jesus Christ. For others, their bedroom or living room is where they grow in intimacy with God. For still others, outside in nature—at the park, on the front porch, or in the backyard is where they find prayerful solitude with Jesus. The bottom line is this: God is everywhere, so when you discover “your” place—a place of minimal distraction that helps you grow in your relationship with God—then pencil it in on your calendar.

### What

What will God and I do during our time together? It is important that we have a plan in place on our calendar for our intentional time of prayer. If we don't do this, the following can happen: We pencil in fifteen minutes of prayer beginning at six o'clock in the morning in our living room, but we don't know what or how we are going to pray, so we just sit there thinking about all the things

we could be doing with Jesus. Then, fifteen minutes later, our intentional time is up. Because we didn't have a plan, our time in prayer was not as fruitful as it could have been.

Without a prayer plan, we spend our time “navel gazing” or fixating on the lives of others in our world. Navel gazing is when we dwell on ourselves too much: “How well am I praying? Why haven't I been healed of this wound? Why do I still struggle with this sin? Why don't I feel anything right now?” Instead of focusing on Jesus, we make our prayer all about us. In prayer, Jesus once challenged the lay mystic Gabrielle Bossis, “Who is your God, you or I? Why don't you think of me more than of yourself?” Though it is important to discuss these topics with our spiritual director, it is not possible for a lot of growth to happen in any relationship if we are only focused on ourselves.

On the other hand, our prayer can become too focused on other people (and even on places or things). Instead of actually being intimate with God, we spend our time with him dwelling on

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everyone else. As St. Caesarius of Arles puts it, “A person worships whatever captivates his mind during prayer. Whoever in his prayers thinks of public affairs, or the house he is building, worships them rather than God.”

To safeguard our prayer time with God, we need to have a plan. In each chapter of this book, we have discussed different ways of entering into a deeper intimacy with God: Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, lectio divina, praying the Rosary, using the ARRR model, examination of conscience, praise and worship music, praying the Litany of Gratitude, saying the Litany of Humility, using St. Teresa of Calcutta’s “I THIRST” meditation, among others. Depending on our current season of life, we sometimes will be drawn to a particular prayer or method of praying. This is normal. Simply having some kind of order in our prayer can save us from many distractions and a less than fruitful prayer time.

In addition to penciling in different methods of prayer, I also encourage you to leave your smartphone in the other room or at least put it in silent mode. Typically, we wouldn’t be using our phones during Mass or when we are having a conversation with our significant other. Likewise, prayer is not a time when our phone should be present with its many potential distractions.

After we make our plans with the Lord, we should be open if the Holy Spirit leads us in a different direction. Our prayer plan is simply meant to help us focus on God. As St. Jane de Chantal has said:

“When the Holy Spirit has taken charge of the person who is meditating ... He does with the soul as it pleases him, and all rules and methods vanish away. In the hands of God the soul must become like clay in the hands of a potter, who from it can form any sort of dish ... Prayer must be carried on by grace, and not by deliberate art.”

With Jesus, it is always a good idea to be flexible and open to his guiding us in a new direction, much like the Holy Spirit did with the apostles at Pentecost.

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## Who

At the end of the day, no person is an island. We cannot live our relationship with Jesus on our own. Jesus did not call a single disciple. Rather, he called together a group of disciples to walk with each other toward eternity. We all need someone to hold us accountable. As a priest, I am accountable to my bishop. A religious sister or brother is accountable to his or her superior. A husband is accountable to his wife, and vice versa. Each of us needs someone to check on us and encourage us in our walk with the Lord.

I cannot tell you how many times I have witnessed people encounter Jesus at a conference or retreat who then express a desire to have a deeper relationship with him. They do not stay true to this holy desire because they do not have anyone to check on them and hold them accountable, so they fall back to their former way of living. In the Scriptures, Nathan held King David accountable to being holy, even when he found it uncomfortable and difficult. Though being vulnerable can be difficult, I strongly encourage you to choose someone in your life who can be your “accountability partner.” This person will check in with you regularly and ask you the following questions:

1. What are you currently doing for prayer?
2. How often do you pray?
3. How long do you pray each time?

Give your accountability partner permission to check on you via email, text, calls, or in person. If you are a married man, I would encourage you to invite another Christian man to be your accountability partner so that your emotional boundaries aren't crossed. Similarly, if you are a married woman, I would encourage you to invite a Christian woman to be your accountability partner.

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## Why

For each of us, the “why” in our relationship with God will be different. Speaking for myself, I need to pray every day so that I can abide in God’s love for me. When I am not faithful to my time with Jesus, I become like the Israelites in the Old Testament and quickly forget how much God sees me, knows me, and loves me. If I am not daily receiving the love of God, then it becomes difficult for me to share his love with the often messy and broken members of his Church. I am able to give love because I receive love.

In the Gospels, Jesus performed a miracle in which he blessed five loaves of bread and two fish—and these fed five thousand people. To feed those who were hungry, Jesus “multiplied” the bread and fish and shared them with his disciples, who in turn shared them with the people (see Matthew 14:13-21). But how did such a small number of apostles manage to distribute so much food to five thousand people? They kept going back to Jesus for more. In other words, they sat at Jesus’ feet and received the gift from him, and then they went to the people and shared this gift. If they had not gone to Jesus to receive the gift, they would not have anything to share with so many people who were hungry.

In this well-known miracle of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish, we see why it is so necessary for us to pray often and consistently. The more we receive the love of God, the more capable we are of sharing his love with others.

We know that the Church’s members are broken—all of them, including you and me. Yet in the midst of our brokenness and imperfections, Jesus loves us and dwells with us. If this is how Jesus loves us, then we, his disciples, are called to bring his love to others. As we have seen, only through intentional time spent with Jesus every day is this possible.

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This cheatsheet is an excerpt from Fr. Josh Johnson's new book, *Broken and Blessed*, helping Catholics renew their faith.

*In Broken and Blessed you'll find...*

- Charitable answers to millennials' common concerns with the Catholic Faith
- Inspiring stories from Fr. Josh's faith journey
- A plan to encounter Jesus in a personal way
- Insights on overcoming habitual sins
- Discussion on the purpose of prayer
- Resolutions to overcoming distractions in prayer

*Broken and Blessed* is available here for purchase.

