

Savoring
the Sacred,
the Real, and the True

Contemplative Responses to Scripture
Matthew – John

Julia S. Ledford

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Endorsements

You will enjoy this experience! This is not a book to read; rather, it is a book to pray. It will invoke a deeper, ongoing conversation with God. As you pray, you will reflect and rejoice on insights gained from the Spirit. Your prayers will focus on heart-searching contemplation. You will discover that God has heard, and that God cares.

This is a book of faith “that the New Testament is a true record of a world-changing, life-altering, eternity-sealing, ongoing act of God.” This is a new way of reading and experiencing the Bible! You are invited to: Read, Pray, Think, Reflect, and Respond.

Author Julia Ledford has experienced the journey. She has recorded in this book an approach to Bible study and meditation that will help readers escape the wilderness and proceed toward the Promised Land!

Bruce P. Powers
Langston Professor of Christian Education
Campbell University Divinity School
Buies Creek, North Carolina

Through the slow and prayerful reading of the gospels, this book of prayers offers rhythm and a structure to reading the gospels and reconnects you with God — God in the holy scriptures, God within you, and God within the world and all creation. In my own life, I found such a reading to be formative, refreshing and yet personally challenging as I engaged scripture and God in new ways.

Deedra Rich
Instructor, Spirituality Program, Columbia Theological Seminary

Christ-followers who long for transformative experiences with God will find this prayer book to be a faithful partner in the journey. Not only did this book of prayers call me to set aside time to engage my spirit with the gospel passages, but Julia’s prayers often sent me back to the same Scripture passage eagerly focusing on what I overlooked that she so eloquently and thoughtfully captured in her authentic conversation with the Holy One.

Dr. Clella Lee
Leadership Consultant, Christian Women’s Leadership Center

If used as she intends, Julia Ledford's book of prayers will apply the brakes to your runaway train of life and give you a second breath before you must careen around the next curve. *Savoring the Sacred, the Real and the True: Contemplative Responses to Scripture* is such a brake lever.

Savoring the Sacred is not a Bible study. Julia is not going line by line, parsing the Greek derivatives. More than an exposition of word and phrases, she captures the spirit of each selected passage, nourishes it with insight and releases it to bless your soul.

Filled with humility and transparency, Julia admonishes us that "this is not a book to read; rather it is a book to pray." There are bookshelves and libraries filled with books on prayer, about prayer, how to pray, of prayers and Julia humbly acknowledges that the last thing she wanted to produce was another placeholder on someone's shelf. If you get this book and leave it on the shelf, you will be missing both a blessing and an opportunity for growth.

She reminded me that it is a frightening, humbling and awesome privilege to approach the living God. We are pots clinging precariously to a wobbly table top and a single breath by a displeased potter could shatter us on the floor. Yet we approach God casually and act presumptively.

Julia's prayers are confessional, transparent, insightful, yearning, soulful. She encourages you not to "pray HER prayers" but to use them as a guide. Use her words if you will and if you must, but her greater joy will be when you see her words only as rocks that pave the road to your own prayers. You cannot approach the living God as someone else or on the back of another, or on the prayers or deeds of someone else. Ultimately, you come to God as an individual and Julia's prayerful insights into the passages she has chosen will help you abrade your protective scales and step outside of your insulation to show God willingly what He can already see without your permission: your bleeding, tearful soul, unshackled, free at last, ready to grow out of and away from our Christian cultural expectations into the freedom fields of true communion with God.

She confesses, from Matthew 8:21-34, that her "fear is real and remains." She admits she has "preferred to socialize with the attractive and affluent when you would draw aside to dine with the unattractive, unclean and even despised." From Luke 17:20-37 she confesses a misguided clamoring for success and now, "I stand before your unpredictable and uncontrollable power and am dismayed. I am unworthy and overwhelmed by the jeopardy in which I have lived."

The jeopardy in which I have lived. Julia's book of prayers will help you step out of the jeopardy of presumption upon God and into the security and blessing of relationship.

Norman Jameson
Writer, Advancement Consultant
WordsAndDeeds.me

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Introduction

To all those who choose to at least look over this book, thank you! I hope you will decide to read it prayerfully. I encourage you to do more than read it, for it is a book of prayer. Therefore, my real desire is that you will pray with me. These prayers arose in response to scripture as I read through the Gospels. So, actually, this is not a book to read; rather it is a book to pray. To a large extent, it is a book that is intended to invoke a deeper, ongoing conversation with God.

So, let's talk about what this book is not! This is not intended to be a typical book *of* prayers nor a book *about* prayer. It is not an intellectual treatise or doctrinal commentary, though personal commentary is naturally woven into the prayers. The prayers are meant to reflect a conversation with God, with musings expressed as much as petitions. Overall, it is a believing response, full of trust, reverence, and even questions for the One True God, whose yearning for us underlies all of life, especially the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Through these prayers, I hope to foster a dialogue between the Word of God, the reader — and the world. These prayers emerged in response to devotional, reflective, repeated readings of each passage in the ancient *Lectio Divina* style. Rather than reading a passage three to four times at one sitting as in *Lectio Divina*, each passage was read daily for three to four days until a prayer of response emerged to be articulated. If I were to begin all over again, each prayer would be different — as I would be reading, meditating, and responding within a different context of my life. So the reader may find that some prayers “fit” and some do not. I encourage each person to pray their own prayers more than mine, but I hope that my prayers will inspire them to dig even deeper into scripture for a more meaningful communion with God.

Above all, this is a book of faith expressing that the New Testament is a true record of the world-changing, life-altering, eternity-sealing, ongoing

act of God. The overall interpretation is viewed through the lens of God's magnificent love, which triumphs over Judgment and extends Grace, Mercy, and Hope to every person who seeks God with an open, honest heart.

It is my prayer that each person who reads (and prays) this book will encounter the truth of God's love in a fresh way, and be encouraged to follow His Son Jesus down the path of life with increasing and unwavering fidelity. My hope is that it will open a fresh and meaningful perspective on the pathway into all the rich treasures of God's Word in the Gospels.

I have used the Revised Standard Version (RSV) primarily because that is in my heart language — the version that my heart has come to know with intimacy and familiarity over many years. However, I would encourage readers to engage with these texts using a translation that speaks to each person's own soul and that releases the truth within God's loving revelation. For some passages, I also followed the New International Version (NIV) or King James Version (KJV) when the translation illuminated the passage with fresh insight for me. References quoted from each focal passage are identified by quotation marks without text citations, but other quoted passages are cited in the endnotes.

Overall, I have sought to pray and write with a sense of community, for I have learned that we are never fully with God until we accept our place among all the others loved by God. So, plural pronouns are used often. However, there are times when I have chosen to use singular personal pronouns to assist the reader in personalizing the prayers.

I know that we must recognize our joint commonality before God, and that no one is an island unto himself — or God. He created and redeemed us all for union together with Him. I am aware that, while these prayers are personally mine, they may also serve as a reflection of the needs and experiential faith of each one of us who are a part of the Christian community. We were all created for union with God and Jesus' last prayer was for all who believe in Him to be One in the union that He has with God the Father (John 17).

So, when we pray, we can never truly pray alone. Jesus' model prayer begins "Our" Father because we never pray in isolation. However, that being said, sometimes the heart cries out in the singular. Sometimes we feel very alone, isolated by our misdeeds and the misdeeds of others, or by our own misplaced affections and desires. My overarching intent has been to make these prayers the human outpourings of "ordinary" believers, shaped in the personal conversational ways that we often pray when we pray from

the heart. In those times, feel free to pray any of these prayers in the first person. Cry out as “I” in need of God’s grace. Bow before the Holy God, pleading, “Have mercy upon *me*.”

Appreciation

I must first of all express my gratitude to my mother, who taught me to pray on my knees beside her, where I heard the words of “forgiveness” and “protection” for the first time, and recognized them as great treasures to be sought from the Lord our God. In my child’s imagination, I envisioned protection as a gleaming circle of silver, and forgiveness as a bright circle of gold. I have sought and treasured them all of my life as God’s cherished, imperishable gifts.

I also have deep appreciation for my husband, who has encouraged my growth in faith and ministry. Neither of us ever dreamed that I would be called into formal ministry. We were both born in the 1940s and grew up in the era of the 1950s and ’60s. Within the culture of that day, women worked, for the most part, at home or in one of three professions: teacher, nurse, or secretary. I chose the latter until I found that my soul was drying up for lack of a sense of fulfillment. Gradually, I grew to understand a call into ministry, which unfolded over a period of thirty years and into various roles.

In opportunities for worship leadership, it felt natural to me to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in preparation — including the writing of prayers for congregational worship. Over a period of fifteen years, I was encouraged by a surprising number of people of all ages to publish a book of my prayers, but was reluctant to add yet another book to the shelves. My own shelves bulged with such books and that is a minor treasury of the world’s great writings on prayer. It seemed preposterous for me to expect to write a collection of prayers that might find a place among them. Whether this ends up in such a position, or only in the hands of a few friends, I am grateful to friends at Hayes Barton Baptist Church and beyond who urged me to publish.

I am grateful to the universal church at large for the heritage of faith and spiritual practice that was handed on to me, and I hope to participate in

that ongoing dissemination of the gospel through this writing. My heritage began in the small-town, grassroots evangelical belief systems of denominations rooted in revivalist culture. As I moved into formal ministry, I was blessed with exposure to other traditions and theological viewpoints. While I remain a simple believer of the basic gospel handed on to me, I appreciate the freedom and enrichment that I found in the wider theological reflections and historical practices of Christian tradition. The writings of many ancient and current Christian thinkers have enriched my faith and shaped my understanding, providing a rich backdrop for my prayerful reflections.

I am happy also to have had the support of professors and colleagues at Campbell University and Divinity School, who helped me believe in my place in professional ministry. In the 1980s, I was affirmed in my calling to ministry while studying at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. I have also been encouraged by connections with fellow pilgrims and faculty in the Spiritual Formation certification program of Columbia Theological Seminary. Altogether and individually, many persons have helped me to believe that there is an ear for my written prayers. To them, I am deeply appreciative.

Above all, I have been blessed to know Jesus as Lord and Savior since I was seven years old, and I offer utmost praise to God for leading me to Jesus so that He could bring me to God! What a wonderful arrangement of Grace for us all! In other words, I gladly proclaim that all of my life is a gift from God and this latest adventure could not have happened without His loving hand guiding all along the way.

Foreword

In writing these prayers, I have written primarily for those who are learning to seek God in quietness. God commanded Moses to take off his shoes, because he was on Holy Ground. When we have our shoes on, we are ready for action, so God signified that we would find Him when we stopped our everyday endeavors for focused intervals with Him. This book is for those who are ready to recognize and reverently enter the holy setting into which we place ourselves when we read and pray in response to scripture. The reader may find it helps them focus if they literally take off their shoes as a physical act of recognition that we enter God's presence when we read scripture and pray.

We remember that God said to the Psalmist, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Elijah too learned that lesson (1 Kings 19:12). He had sought God as we often do — in bold expressions of power and might. He was surprised to hear God's voice only when he quit that search and stood still in quiet expectancy and intense listening — and was able to finally hear a still, small voice. Moses learned to turn aside and stand in the holy place where God would commune with him (Exodus 3:2). Jesus engaged in a balance of prayer, solitude, and community, slipping off into the hillsides for time alone with His Father (Matthew 14:23). The biblical model is clear. We need to spend time alone, still and quiet, with God.

In Psalm 23, we are shown images of God as our Good Shepherd, leading us to lie down in green pastures and rest beside still waters, nurtured and satisfied. I have found that experience is possible when I take time, long periods of time, to sit still with God and His Word in living and loving communion. Jesus said to enter our inner room (closet) to meet God who sees us in secret, and I have come to understand the deeper invitation is to enter the realm of our soul, where no one else ever really knows us but God. We are surprised to find God there, in our hidden inner soul, yet Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is within You" (Luke 17:21). Taken together,

these passages offer an invitation to find God within rather than far away, close rather than distant, loving and welcoming rather than blaming and excluding.

The prayers are based on scripture, so just as some passages are long and others are brief, some prayers are long and others are relatively brief. Feel free to read in segments if your time allotment requires brevity, but I encourage you to stretch your time frame by re-arranging your daily activities to open a longer window of time for meeting with the God who has your back for time and eternity.

I would encourage you to take this opportunity to establish a new way of reading scripture, if you are not already engaging in this practice. *Lectio Divina* is an ancient process of reading and reflecting that enhances our capacity to discern the truth of scripture that the Spirit seeks to speak into our hearts and to work into our lives.

While I recognize that some of you may not feel you can follow my preferred way of engaging with this book, I recommend that you at least try to read in the manner outlined below:

- I. Remind yourself that you come to a place to meet God when you come to His divinely inspired Word in scripture.
- II. Read the focal passage through once, slowly and prayerfully, for content.
- III. Slowly read the passage a second time, reflecting on the words, phrases, characters, and actions that most claim your attention.
- IV. Read again slowly and pray in response to what the Spirit is impressing on your mind and heart.
- V. Sit silently for at least five minutes, allowing no conscious thoughts to dominate. Attempt to fulfill God's yearning for you to "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Listen with your soul.
- VI. The next step is to read and personalize the prayer I have written for the focal passage you have encountered.
- VII. Reflect and rejoice on insights gained from the Spirit. Record new understandings and fresh revelations in a journal and/or write your own prayer of response! Who knows, maybe you, too, will publish a book of prayers! I would love to know that my simple book had inspired that!