

# AWAKENING TO GOD IN EVERYTHING

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. KEN SHIGEMATSU. 2013 SEPTEMBER 22.



1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

.....

A number of years ago, *The New Yorker* ran a story about a couple who had just gotten married. They whisked off to a tropical paradise, and as they were checking in to their resort hotel late that night, the groom was excited because he had reserved the superior room with an ocean view. But when they came to their actual room on the 20th floor and opened the door, they were both disappointed because they discovered that they were in this small space – no view of the ocean, no real bed; just one of these sofa beds that you fold out, a little table on the side with a lamp.

So the groom picked up the phone, angry. He called down to the front desk and said, “I think there’s been a mistake. I’m on my honeymoon and I was expecting a much bigger and much better room.” The person at the front desk said, “Well, just let me check for a moment.” And then she said, “I’m sorry, but the hotel is completely booked tonight; we can’t move you to another room. But maybe tomorrow someone won’t show up, and we can change your room then.”

The groom slammed down the phone, mad, and he and his new bride went on to unfold the sofa bed. It was uncomfortable and they didn’t sleep well. It wasn’t the night that they had hoped for. The next morning, the groom thought, “Well, maybe I can redeem the situation just a little bit by showing my new bride that at least I have backbone.” He said to his bride, “Let’s go downstairs to the lobby; I’m going to give the hotel a piece of my mind.”

They went downstairs; the groom slammed his fist on the counter and said, “I ordered a superior room, and you guys made a big mistake on the night of our honeymoon. What are you going to do about it?” The staff person said, “Well, give me the number of your room.” The groom did so. She said, “Well, let’s go up to your room.” And so they rode the elevator to the 20th floor and went into the room, and the staff person pointed at a door and said, “Did you check that door?” They were like, “No. We got in really late last night, so we didn’t even bother to open the closet.”

With a twinkle in her eye, she walks over to the door and opens it up, and it leads into this massive room with an unobstructed, beautiful view of the ocean. There’s a king-size bed; there are flowers on a small table beside the bed and chocolates on the bed with a handwritten note saying, “Congratulations on your wedding!”

Now, I wasn’t there at the time, but I can imagine how the couple might have felt. On the one hand, they were probably feeling joy and gratitude in this spacious new place, but on the other hand, they were also probably feeling regret and some embarrassment about not having accessed this part of their suite from the time they checked in.

I don’t want to get to a point in my life where one day I look back and realize that I haven’t accessed the very space God wanted me to live in. I don’t want to look back one day and feel that I’ve been hanging around in this small entryway of my life when God had so much more for me.

We need God’s help.

Thomas Merton, a perceptive writer on the spiritual life, has said, “In prayer we discover what we already have. ... Everything has been given to us in Christ.” In prayer, “we ... experience what we already possess.” Through a

rhythm of prayer – of connecting with God – we can live in that expansive hotel room with the beautiful view of the ocean. We can enjoy God in each part of our lives.

Tonight, our first text comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, and in this text, the apostle Paul says these words: “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (NIV).

In an older version, Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (with Philippians 4:4a; KJV).

Let’s take a moment to pray.

Living God,

You’re closer to us than our very breath. Awaken our hearts to this reality, we pray – this reality that you died for us to experience in Christ.

It’s in his name we pray.

Amen.

In this message tonight, we’re going to look at how a rhythm – even a simple rhythm – of prayer can enable us to experience God in every part of our lives. Then we’re going to look at how three simple spontaneous prayers can make us more aware of the presence of God all around us, and those simple spontaneous prayers are: Wow, Help and Thank You.

Wow. Help. Thank You.

We’re in a new series. If you’re just here tonight and haven’t been around for a while, we’ve been discussing how a trellis can support our friendship with Jesus. If you’ve been to the vineyards of the Okanagan or the Napa Valley, you know that a trellis supports a grapevine, enabling it to experience more sunlight, be guided in its growth and be pruned so that it will be more fruitful.

Spiritually speaking, God can lead us to build a trellis as well. A trellis is spiritual practices. Last Sunday we looked at Sabbath, and tonight we’re going to look at prayer and then, in the weeks ahead, at themes of sexuality and friendship and justice and so forth. And this combination of spiritual practices – whatever it is that God leads us into – becomes our trellis that supports our friendship with God.

We’ve discussed that, ideally, we have three simple practices: a practice that connect us with God; another practice that nourishes us; and then perhaps a third practice that connects us with each other, in relationship and in service.

And so tonight, we’re going to look at a rhythm of prayer.

Now, the apostle Paul, in our text, says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks.” These words can sound really overwhelming. Is it possible to actually pray without ceasing? Is it even desirable?

A guy named John Cassian was a church father in the fifth century, and he took this verse where Paul calls us to “[p]ray without ceasing” quite literally. He instructed the monks under his care to engage in simple manual labour, like working in the fields or weaving baskets in a cave; then he said, “As you’re engaged in this simple manual labour, pray. Pray all the time.” Guess what they discovered? That praying all the time is really, really tiring. That it is exhausting. And even John Cassian himself, later in his life, questioned the feasibility and the

wisdom of that call he had made to his monks.

In the next century, Saint Benedict also reflected on the relationship between work and prayer, and his point of view was more moderate and, in my opinion, wiser. His summarized thinking has been expressed in the simple dictum: To pray is to work and to work is to pray. What does Benedict mean when he says this? Benedict means that if you and I have a simple rhythm of prayer and then engage in a work that honours God, then that work becomes a prayer to God. Benedict would say to his monks, “Engage in a rhythm of prayer. Then, as you go out and work the fields or as you study in the library or as you prepare a meal in the kitchen, know that that work is an active devotion to God and, therefore, a prayer to God.”

Some people find it difficult to pray for a long period of time in a sustained, focused way. It may be more fruitful for some of us here, instead of trying to pray for a long period of time (say, once a day), to instead pray several times a day but for briefer periods of time.

William Barry is a respected spiritual director, and he observes that you and I meet God at every moment of the day, but we are not always aware of God’s reality. If this is the case – if we are meeting God at every moment of the day – then each period of our day could be considered a time of prayer. The simple rhythm of prayer awakens us to the fact that we are meeting with God – in essence, praying – all the time.

Carlo Carretto was a hermit who spent many years praying in the Sahara Desert. He had a mother who never spent any time praying in the Sahara Desert, but according to Carlo Carretto, his own mother, who had spent 30 years of her life raising children, was much more contemplative and less selfish than he was. How could that be? Well, Carlo’s mother had a simple rhythm of prayer, but her parenting became a prayer to God because it honoured God. As she prayed, much like a monk who retreats to the desert, she was withdrawing from places of worldly prestige and power; she was becoming less selfish, more mature – and if you do something that makes you *that*, then that is prayer.

Think about your own temperament and your own life circumstance: Would it be fruitful for you to spend maybe one or two longer periods of prayer in a day, or would it be more fruitful to have a rhythm of several times of brief prayer throughout the day? If you feel that the latter might be more helpful for you in your current circumstance or given your personality, you also might consider engaging in longer periods of prayer from time to time, as you are able. If you’re married – some of you are married tonight – you probably check in with your spouse from time to time, whether by phone, by text, maybe by FaceTime during the day; but you probably also like to spend more relaxed time, maybe going out for dinner, so that you can discuss an important matter or share a concern or something for which you’re really grateful. If you’ve got kids, you get a babysitter, you go out, and you just savour that unhurried time.

So it is in our relationship with God. We can check in at brief moments in the day, but from time to time, if we can have some unhurried time to express what’s in our heart – a concern, an expression of gratitude – then that will deepen and enhance our friendship with Jesus.

Think about your personality, your life circumstance: What kind of rhythm of prayer would work best for you?

In the appendix to *God in My Everything*, there are examples of people who are working and who have brief times of prayer during their workday. There’s an engineer named Jonathan— By the way, these are all real people in here. Jonathan’s an engineer and he describes two brief times during his workday where he pauses for five minutes to pray. There’s a guy named Stephen who has his times of prayer over breakfast: He reads the Scriptures and prays; he envisions he is having a meal with Jesus.

So pick a rhythm that works well for you. Ask yourself: What would that look like? Is it better by myself, or does it help to pray with someone else, if that's possible?

We're emphasizing Life Together this year, and if you have ideas about a rhythm of prayer that works for you and that might inspire or inform someone else, I would invite you to post your experience or your ideas on our new website: [Facebook.com/GodInMyEverything](https://www.facebook.com/GodInMyEverything). We'd love to hear from you.

If you are less structured and more spontaneous – or even if you are more structured, but you feel that spontaneous expressions of prayer might be fruitful for you – I want to introduce you to three spontaneous essential prayers that I have learned from one of my favourite writers, Anne Lamott, who is based out of San Francisco. These prayers, as I indicated earlier, are Wow, Help and Thank You, and they roughly correspond to Paul's exhortation to “[r]ejoice in the Lord always. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks.”

First of all: Wow.

Paul says, “Rejoice.” “Wow” is a kind of informal version of “Rejoice” – I think more of maybe a vernacular version.

If you have trouble sensing the presence of God in your life or perhaps have difficulty trusting God, I want you to think about an experience you've had where you experienced real gratitude – a deep sense of joy where your heart said, “Wow!” Maybe you were at your favourite beach in Vancouver; or maybe you were in the woods or seeing a beautiful sunset – the poet Mary Oliver says the sun is the “best preacher that ever was”; or maybe you were listening to beautiful music or reading a compelling novel or viewing an amazing piece of art; or you were with your nephew or niece or a very special friend – and your heart was saying, “Wow!” If you can associate that experience with God and remind yourself that God made the beach, that God made the sun, that God inspired the artist, that God made that person – then your “Wow!” can be directed to God and can become a spontaneous prayer.

Several years ago I was sailing up through the Howe Sound, and as we were coming back on our trip – we were somewhere between Gibsons and Bowen Island and it was one of those perfectly clear days: the sun was glistening on the water and I was just bursting with happiness – I just was so mesmerized by the beauty all around me. Now, I was sailing with some other people who were enjoying the scenery as well; they didn't believe in God, but they were certainly having a good time. Yet I am convinced that I was experiencing a much deeper joy – I thought that maybe I had already died and gone to paradise because my heart was going, “Wow, God, wow! This is just amazing!” I was just dumbfounded by everything around me. Why? Because I knew that the beauty around me was not the result of some cosmic accident but that a Grand Artist had made this, and I actually knew that Artist.

Anne Lamott's son Sam, when he was six years old, explained to his mom why we call God “God.” Have you ever thought about why we call God “God”? Well, according to six-year-old Sam, we call God “God” because whenever we see something great, we just go, “God!” When he saw dolphins for the first time, in Mexico, he went, “God!” When he saw snow for the first time, he was like, “God!” When he saw a fire engine as a kid, he was like, “God!” And when we see something great, we can say, “God!” or “Wow!” – and that is a spontaneous prayer that we can pray.

We can also pray Help.

Paul says, “Pray without ceasing.” How's that possible? Someone has said, “I only pray when I'm in trouble, but I'm in trouble all the time, so I'm praying all the time.” C. S. Lewis similarly said, “I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping.”

[Praying] doesn't change God. It changes me." When our heart cries out, "Help!" and we become aware of God, even when we're in trouble, we find ourselves in this much more expansive space. We see the ocean, so to speak, and it changes us.

This prayer of Help has great precedence in Scripture. Nehemiah, in what we describe as the Old Testament, was going to approach King Artaxerxes to ask for a big favour, for permission to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem. He's kind of nervous before he makes the request, and so in his heart, he cries, "Help, God! Give me favour."

In the Gospels – in the Gospel of John – there's this blind person named Bartimaeus who hears that Jesus Christ is about to pass by on the road in front of him. When he senses Jesus passing by, Bartimaeus cries out, "Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." That prayer has since been prayed throughout the history of the church; it's also known as the Jesus Prayer. People often abbreviate it by simply praying, "Lord, have mercy." I often pray, "Lord, have mercy. Help, help, help."

Before an exam or an essay you need to write, you can pray, "Help." Before you balance a financial statement or perform surgery, you can pray, "Help." Before you prepare a meal or put a child to bed, if you're a parent, you can pray, "Help, help, help."

And we can pray Help not only for ourselves but for other people, too.

Danae is a friend who lived here in Vancouver for a while and she says, "When I'm on the bus" – meaning here in Vancouver or elsewhere in the city – "and I'm faced with the brokenness of humanity – I look around and see someone on the bus who is obviously lonely or in pain – I breathe in the brokenness, seeing it and naming it, and then I breathe out a prayer of help. I offer the pain to Christ and breathe out the peace of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit into that person's life or into the situation."

Marian is a mom in our community; she was in my small group on the Rule of Life. She says, "Every day, I pray a Help or Breath prayer. At some point in the morning, I pray for the protection of my family. It's a brief prayer that involves putting on the armour of God, which can be found in Ephesians 6." And she says, "Sometimes I cannot even remember what that armour entails because it's too early and I'm not functioning that well" – she stays up late; she's an artist. "But I know what's important, so I may pray that, today, John B. or Gracie or Sam or Lukas 'puts on the armour of God, in the name of Jesus. Amen.'" And Marian says, "I learned that prayer from my mom at a young age, and it has stuck."

So: Wow. Help. And then we can also pray Thank You.

Paul says, "[In every thing give thanks.](#)" I'm a very absentminded kind of person, and I'm often misplacing my keys or my phone. When I find my keys or my phone, I say, "Thank you!" "Did you see my keys? Thank you to you and thank you to God." Sometimes a "Thanks!" is even more deeply felt, like when I lost my wallet on the bus and someone turned it in. Maybe you've lost a passport while traveling – I haven't done that because my wife always takes care of the passport when we're traveling. But you find your passport or you have your wallet returned to you, and it's like a bigger "Thank you!" Or some of you who are parents know that if you lose your toddler at the shopping mall— Boy, that's like a big panic-anxiety situation for the parent. When you find that toddler, it's like, "Thank you!" Or you hear that you are now cancer-free – that is a big "Thank you!"

Thank You is so important for me that I not only pray this spontaneously, but most nights, as I'm about to go to sleep, I'll hit the rewind button on the day and then hit the play button. I'll review the different conversations I've had, the different work projects, the meals, the experiences – and I'll ask myself, "Where did I feel most gratitude today? Where did I feel most joy? most alive?" I'll savour that experience and say, "Thank you, God, for that." I'll

also ask myself, “Where did I feel least gratitude? Where did I feel most down? most frustrated? most stressed out? most disconnected from God?” And I’ll also lift that up to God in prayer.

Paul calls us to give thanks not *for* everything but *in* everything – and there is a difference.

If you were here several weeks ago, I shared about how my 99-year-old grandmother, this past summer, had a stroke and, not long thereafter, died. I didn’t give thanks *for* my grandmother’s death, but there were things *in* my grandmother’s death for which I could give thanks: I could give thanks that she didn’t suffer much before she died, as far as I know. I could give thanks for the fact that she died in the presence of her family and the people she loved in Japan. And she died longing to see her Maker – that was something for which to give thanks.

A number of years ago, my grandfather went through a business reversal, a financial reversal. Normally we don’t give thanks for a family member’s financial reversal, but as a result of that loss and humiliation, my grandfather’s heart, for the first time, began to open to the divine mystery – and that was something for which to give thanks.

Sometimes we go through something really painful or perhaps even tragic – and we do not give thanks for that. But sometimes – as has been true for Matthew and Tim, as we heard in their stories tonight – we get an insight, and there is a blessing even in the pain and the tragedy – and for the blessing we can give thanks.

Pedro Arrupe was elected the head of the Jesuits in the 1960s. For many years he had served as a faithful missionary in Japan. In fact, he was in Japan in 1945, serving as a missionary; when the atomic bomb exploded in Hiroshima, he was around. Later in his life, he experienced a series of strokes that eventually would take his life, and as he started experiencing these strokes, this is what he wrote in his journal. Listen. Pedro Arrupe wrote:

More than ever I find myself in the hands of God.  
This is what I have wanted all my life from my youth.

But now there is a difference;  
the initiative is entirely with God.

It is indeed a profound spiritual experience  
to know and feel myself so totally in God’s hands.

From the time Pedro Arrupe was a little boy, he prayed, “God, I just want to be in your hands.” He would have never chosen this, but through his strokes, his prayer was answered, and he could give thanks for the fact that now he knew his life was totally in God’s hands.

When we know that our life is in God’s hands, then, even when we’re going through something really difficult, we are in that room with a view of the ocean; we’re in a much more expansive space.

I know – from my relationships with people who attend Tenth and from emails I’ve received – that some of you have a hard time believing in God. And yet you come. Anne Lamott describes how she knew this famous artist in San Francisco who was an atheist and who was dying of his alcoholism – it was literally killing him. Anne suggested to this atheist that he just imagine that he had a Higher Power. So the artist did, and for about six weeks this artist was so happy, so loving, so radiant: His friends would come by and they would take him on drives; they would take him on ferryboat rides in the San Francisco Bay Area; they would take him out for lunch. Then, after six weeks, this guy (who would refer to his Higher Power for those weeks first of all as “HP” and then “Hewlett Packard”) began drinking again, and he re-embraced his fiercely atheistic beliefs. He became mean and ugly and sourly and drove away all his friends, and he died miserable and alone, true to his beliefs to the end.

Here is the thing: If our hearts can actually awaken to the reality of God, it will change everything for us. It really will.

Sometimes when I meet people and they find out I'm a pastor, they imagine for a moment and they say, "It must be really hard. Because aren't you dealing with a lot of people in crisis or in great upheaval?" It's true that that's a pretty regular part of the job for folks like Jay and Sam and me. And I fairly regularly stand in front of large groups of people where I don't know anyone – I'm not talking about here at Tenth but beyond Tenth. My job does involve stress. But here's the thing: I imagine that I do my work for Jesus and to Jesus – but also *with* Jesus. And when I have the confidence that I'm doing my work for Jesus, to Jesus and with Jesus, it changes everything. Even though the situation may be stressful and I'm like, "I don't know what to say; I don't know how to respond," there is a joy in my work because I'm doing it with Jesus. And I love my work. Being with Jesus makes me feel like I am in that hotel room with the view of the ocean.

You go on a Jesuit retreat. There's a good chance your director will approach you at the beginning of the day and say, "Regan, I want you to imagine that all day long Jesus is walking right beside you." Or, "Jay, all day long I want you to imagine that Jesus is walking right beside you. Just talk to Jesus like he were right beside you throughout the days; he comes to mind as you notice." Then, at the end of the day, the director would say, "What was that like?" And you talk about it, and then the director would say, "Well, that's not just your imagination. Jesus is walking with you at every moment of your day." And when we realize that, that changes everything.

My hope is that, through our trellises (and each of them looks different), our friendship with the one who walks beside us, Jesus Christ, will just flourish. My hope is that we would discover a rhythm of prayer that would enable us to know that we already have everything in Christ – that everything has been given to us in him, and we simply need to enjoy what we already possess. My hope and prayer is that we would become people who increasingly live in this expansive room with a view of the ocean; that we would increasingly move into this space that God intends for us and that Christ died for us to inhabit. My prayer is that, increasingly, we would grow more and more aware of Jesus in our everything.

Let's pray together.

Yesterday afternoon, Saturday, I went to the pool with our son, who is just five years old. He was hanging off of my neck. I could feel him breathing on my neck. Have you ever felt someone breathing on you because they were that close? Well, God is so close to you that he is breathing on you. He is breathing on you. Do you sense him? Are you aware of that?

Perhaps pray with me that you would become aware of the very breath of God on your face – the breath of the one who loves you more than you can imagine. And pray that you would discover the kind of rhythm of prayer that would make you aware of – *alive to* – that reality that Jesus is meeting with you all the time.

[silence]

And we pray these things in the name of Jesus, the one who is beside us.

Amen.

---

## REFLECTION QUESTION

- What rhythm of prayer might work well for you?

## RECOMMENDED READING

Shigematsu, Ken. "Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship with God." *God in My Everything*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

Voskamp, Ann. *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.

---

## CITE THIS SERMON

- APA Shigematsu, K. (2013, September 22). *Awakening to God in Everything*. Transcript of sermon delivered at Tenth Church, Vancouver, BC. Retrieved [Month D, YYYY], from [URL]
- CMS Shigematsu, Ken. "Awakening to God in Everything." Transcript of sermon delivered at Tenth Church, Vancouver, September 22, 2013. *Tenth.ca*, accessed [Month D, YYYY], [URL].
- MLA Shigematsu, Ken. "Awakening to God in Everything." *God in My Everything* Sermon Series. Tenth Church. Vancouver. 22 Sept. 2013. *Tenth.ca*. Web. [D Mon. YYYY]. Transcript.
- TURABIAN Shigematsu, Ken. "Awakening to God in Everything" (Transcript). Sermon, Tenth Church, Vancouver, September 22, 2013, [URL] (accessed [Month D, YYYY]).