

THE SECRET OF LIFE
21 Days of Faith 2007
The User's Guide

Welcome to 21 Days of Faith!

One of the easiest and hardest questions anyone following God can face is: What exactly is it that following God *does* for someone?

On the one hand, this is the easiest question ever! Most people I know who've had what they regard as a genuine encounter with God wonder how they ever got along without it! They've seen so many prayers answered. They've felt so much more hopeful for their future. Perhaps they've found a group of steadfast friends unlike any they've had before. You talk about a great move!

But every now and again someone will press them a little bit beyond this. "Great," they might say. "That sounds terrific and I can see why you like it. But break it down for me. How specifically does *God* factor into all those good things?"

And, arguably, you might find yourself answering that he does **four primary things** for someone connecting with him.

1. God gives us encouragement and hope about our future, whatever happens.
2. God connects us in a meaningful and lasting way to others, particularly others similarly trying to connect with him.
3. God connects us to himself. And, as a throw-in, to ourselves.
4. God gives us vision for what our lives can be about.

As those things happen, God *also* responds to things we pray about—he loves to *do stuff* for us.

21 Days of Faith is a four-week faith experiment about all of these things. We've found that seeing God do things for us has been a super-crucial way into experiencing the deeper good things of numbers 1 through 4. So, over the years, as we've done these (in a longer—40 Day—version), we've heard stories like:

40 days of faith was an amazing experience for me. I asked God to give my brother a job (who was unemployed for 2 years) and for my parents/family to find some kind of happiness after a terrible car accident that happened in '03. After 40 days of faith, in the same week my brother got a job, I got a job and my parents bought a new house—a sign from God that, despite trials and tribulations, he still has enormous blessings awaiting us.

I was in the last year of my job, with no prospects and not even sure I wanted to continue in that path. I also had/have quite a bit of debt. During the 40 Days, I prayed for God to give me a job that I would love that would allow me to serve him and to help me pay off my debt. Two weeks before my contract ran out, I got a promotion to a better job. And, to top it off, the job is residential. I have an apartment with all utilities provided! So I can work off my debt! God is truly amazing!

Having just moved to Boston at the beginning of the last 40 days, I prayed for a job and friends and God blessed me with both!

I found my wife!!!

I got an idea of what God wants for my life.

I prayed that I would persevere in my relationship with Jesus. Here I am three years later happier than I have ever been in my life.

Our prayer for you during these 21 Days:

Here's what we're dreaming of for you, should you pursue the 21 Days of Faith.

1. That you'd experience at least one concrete and meaningful answer to prayer.
2. That you'd connect or reconnect to God in a surprisingly profound way.
3. That you'd discover at least one new friend who's—as we'll talk about—a “partner in the gospel.”
4. That you'd grow in your own ability to “partner” in what God's up to on earth.

Our key scripture for these next 21 days:

Philippians 1:3-6 (TNIV)

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul talks about this unique relationship he's developed with the folks following Jesus in Philippi that he labels “partnership in the gospel,” or partnership in what God is up to on earth.

Evidently this is not an empty compliment! They've found a place in his heart that, perhaps, no other group of folks found. And their "partnership" with him has quite a bit of power! It empowers him to be cheerful in the middle of unbelievable suffering. It helps empower him to live a life free of two great plagues in our lives: grumbling and arguing. It helps him find a kind of joy so profound that he mentions it again and again.

It can seem surprising that relationships with *other people* could accomplish all of this! One would think that these gifts would be things we'd have to find within ourselves, or perhaps from God directly. And so we do! We *do* need lots and lots of personal growth to be able to pull these things off, and we *do* need to grow in an ever-richer relationship with God to be able to hope for a life like this.

But, nonetheless, Paul seems at pains to say that these relationships are invaluable and irreducible in a life we're going to be happy to have lived.

So what kind of relationships are we talking about here? Are these just great friendships? I think we can categorically say no; what Paul is talking about here goes well beyond that, so far beyond that that it can seem like too high a bar for you and me.

So these folks face some kind of heavy opposition to their pursuit of God, but still "stand firm" and "strive together." They "in humility value others above themselves." They "rejoice in God." They "don't grumble or argue." They resolutely "press on" towards everything God has asked them to do. And they don't fret about prospective suffering or poverty, because they reject anxiety about *anything*. Life holds no threat to them and they feel supported and loved through everything.

It's amazing to think that I have a few friendships that at least feel *related* to this kind of friendship! And these particular friendships do indeed help immensely in my ability to stay cheerful, to stay focused, to have a better marriage, to like living.

Our hope for these 21 Days of Faith is that you'll experience a taste of what this might look like, even as you discover more about a living, active God who's eager to hear and respond to your prayers.

Here's how you can get started.

1. Invite Jesus to address a major personal need.

I have no money or dental insurance and have prayed for years so I could go and take care of lots of broken teeth, etc. A very

*unexpected source has enabled me to take care of my entire mouth.
A real miracle, believe me!*

One of the strange, wonderful truths of faith in Jesus is that he wants us to come to him with the things we want and need, knowing that if we don't, we *will* go elsewhere. Here are a few of the places where we're told that.

*You do not have, because you do not ask.
(James 4:2, ESV)*

*"I also tell you this: If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you."
(Matthew 18:19, NLT)*

*"If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."
(Matthew 21:22, NLT)*

*"You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, because the work of the Son brings glory to the Father. Yes, ask anything in my name, and I will do it!"
(John 14:13, 14, NLT)*

These and other scriptures tell me that God is honored whenever we get in touch with what we really want and ask him for it. Many, many people in our church have had very encouraging responses from God to the things they've prayed for during these seasons, from spouses and jobs to help for family members in trouble and many more. I've prayed for things ranging from book deals to better exercise—and I've got something I'm really excited to ask God for during these 21 days. The key is that we find a significant enough request that it would take God to pull off.

Now, certainly, not everyone gets an immediate answer. But I do think everyone does find a meaningful encounter with God, which perhaps isn't such a bad consolation prize. And, then again, many people *do* see their prayers answered.

So take a moment, pray if you want or just get still. And then jot down:

What do you want Jesus to do for you during these 21 Days?

Now what?

First off, congratulations! You've done a key thing—you've crystallized in your heart and on paper what you want God to do for you, a very important thing. Having done that, can I encourage you to do a few things?

First, ask God for these things every day during the 21 days.

Second, tell someone else (best case scenario: your spouse, if you have one and/or someone in your small group, if you have one) **what you wrote down and ask *them* to pray for you about those things too.**

And it would be neighborly of you if you prayed about *their* things! Jesus says he's uniquely present and at work when two or more people come before him asking for things (Matthew 18:20). Your chances of seeing something happen go way up when someone else is praying too—and they might even have more faith than you do, so you can leech off of them!

Next,

2. Take advantage of the daily Bible guide.

One great gift of these seasons is the chance to learn more about God and his plans for us by spending some time in the Bible. Among the most popular things we do are daily Bible guides written by our Cambridge site pastor, Brian Housman. These are fascinating walks through fascinating stretches of the Bible that tie in with the subject at hand.

These 21 days will offer a look at two heroes of the Old Testament: Daniel (who gave us the idea of a 21 day season of faith) and Esther. These two people both had sudden discoveries of what they were being invited into by God. There are few better places to learn about the ins and outs of becoming a partner with God and with others.

And I think you'll find it to be seriously fun and encouraging along the way.

3. Ask God each day for "my 3."

There are some amazing people waiting for you each Sunday morning.

You don't know who they are yet, but God has them in mind.

Those of us who've been in the church for a few years have been introduced to the concept of "my 6," but we thought we'd tweak that just a bit for these 21 days.

What if God has 3 people in mind for you—whom you don't yet know but will meet some Sunday during these 21 days—who are partners-in-the-gospel-to-be?

You've already got a leg up with these folks—they showed up at a church, so that's got to mean *something* good on this front! Wouldn't it be great if God would direct you to 3 conversations with people whom you'd discover you just clicked with? And who, beyond that, God knew would respond both to you and to his kingdom? Wouldn't that be a home run?

Why not take these 21 days to pray each day for whom God will have you meet that next Sunday? You then could both *act* as a partner with God towards these folks and then *receive* whatever partnership they could bring in return. Seems like a win to me.

4. Put partnership into practice.

Even as you pray for your 3 and ask God to show you fresh partners in the gospel, why not take this brief, 4-week period to explore this kind of partnership?

If you're exploring or re-exploring faith, can I suggest dropping by our class called **SEEK** on Tuesday, September 18? It's a hugely popular group experience designed to help facilitate ways to take fresh steps into faith for folks who feel a bit newer to all of this. Hundreds of folks have taken it over the years and it, as much as anything in our church, has helped people find lasting friends who very much become partners in the gospel. You can learn more about SEEK from the flyer in your program or at www.bostonvineyard.org.

Alternatively, if you feel a bit further along in the things of God, why not try a **small group**, even if only for these 21 days? There will be some help given there each week related to the 21 days and these would be an outstanding place to discover new partners in the gospel. We have over 60 small groups in the church, so one should easily fit your schedule and location. You can browse through small group options both at our website and at the information table in the lobby on Sunday mornings.

At the risk of overstatement, if you give this a try, I'd think there's a very good chance that—at the end of this upcoming year—you'd regard this as the single best thing you did all year. All because of partners in the gospel.

One final note

As you pursue these things, you might want to consider fasting in some way. You might have noticed that when people really wanted something from God in the Bible, they almost always fasted.

What does fasting do?

Fasting tells God and our own spirits that we really are desperate for *God* to meet some need or hope that we have. If you participate in this year's 21 Days, you're hoping for profound vision for your *life*. That sounds like "fast territory" to me.

Though fasting—in any fashion (and we'll talk about some options in a minute)—is, by definition, *hard*, it's actually meant to be a *joyous opportunity*. Suddenly we're really serious about something with God; we're really expecting him to come through; we aren't just playing around. That can often be exhilarating! Should it be something that interests you, I'll give you a few notes about fasting in an appendix to this document.

So God loves to *do things* for us.

He loves to answer prayers and show that he's real. And again, perhaps as God does things for us, he's looking to do these *deepest* of things:

1. To give us encouragement and hope about our future, whatever happens.
2. To connect us in a meaningful and lasting way to others, particularly others similarly trying to connect with him.
3. To connect us to himself. And, as a throw-in, to ourselves.
4. To give us vision for what our lives can be about.

Wouldn't it be great if you could get a taste of those things over the next 21 days? I'll pray that that's exactly what happens for you.

Some appendices:

Our key scripture for these next 21 days:

Philippians 1:3-6 (TNIV)

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Some steps you might take:

1. Invite Jesus to address a major personal need.
2. Take advantage of the daily Bible guide.
3. Ask God each day for “my 3.”
4. Put partnership into practice.
 - a. By way of SEEK or a small group, if only for these 4 weeks.

What are options for fasting?

Well, first off, fasting often involves abstention from food in some way. In shorter fasts, that can be a total abstention from food. These are usually called “**water fasts**,” because water is the only thing going into us. For the most part, I don’t recommend these at any length beyond a week’s time, because after that, health problems can ensue. (Clearly God can speak and call you into anything—but I’d just be aware of the risks if you water fast for more than a week, and be in good touch with a doctor.)

Also, I do not recommend water fasts if you’ve ever suffered from an eating disorder.

Those in our midst who’ve suffered from eating disorders historically have a difficult time separating this sort of fasting from the very motivation that drove them to the disorder, and thereby risk serious health problems. There are other great fasts that will do you a lot of good, if you’ve been in this situation, and can I ask that you’d pursue those?

Other food-abstention fasts involve imposing some sort of **conditions** on our eating over a period of time. (Some folks prefer not to call these “fasts”—reserving that title for water fasts—but prefer to call things like I’ll suggest here “**consecrations**.” Choose whatever terminology works for you!) This can involve anything from giving up some beloved food item for a time (desserts being a popular favorite) to something more challenging, like the so-called “**Daniel fast**,” which involves (as it did for Daniel as you’ll see in our Bible guide) abstaining from everything but vegetables.

For longer fasts, I’ve sometimes done a “**one meal a day**” fast. It’s pretty much what it sounds like. The key is to actually eat a *smaller* meal than you normally would at the time,

and to make that “it” for the day. If you ever know I’m on a “one meal a day” fast and it looks after awhile as if I haven’t lost an ounce, have a little talk with me.

People often pursue “**juice fasts.**” Again, this would customarily apply to *shorter fasts*, but it’s just like a water fast, except you’re allowed to drink juice, which will keep your blood sugar up and actually allow you to function at near-normal capacity.

Are there any non-food-related options?

You bet! Fasting from **television** is a popular choice for folks who aren’t fasting from food.

These can really involve, under God’s direction, doing without *anything* that feels costly to give up for a season. I’ve heard about fasts (or, again, “consecrations”) from *criticism* or from *catalogs*!

The point of fasting is that, under God’s direction, we’re feeling desperate for something and we direct that desperation towards God. It’s just hard to truly be desperate for God and what he might do for us when our bellies are full and all our needs are abundantly provided for.

What does it mean to fast “for” something?

If you fast, I’d encourage you to let God know, frequently, what it is you’re fasting *for* which, I’d think, would at least tie into the “what do you want Jesus to do for you during these 21 Days?” category. So, for instance, during my last long fast I realized in, like, Day 3 that I didn’t really have a specific *focus* for my fast, and I asked God. He seemed to tell me that it was a fast primarily on behalf of a close friend of mine who was really far from God. Not long thereafter, that friend plunged himself into a life of pursuing Jesus for the first time in his life.

Does fasting help us lose weight (and I know you’re asking that on behalf of a friend)?

Isn’t this one of life’s colossal bummers? The answer, from all reputable sources, is, “No, not really.” There are 2 problems that keep this from being, for most people, about weight loss. First, once we’ve fasted (from food) for awhile, our metabolism slows way down (a good thing if we were ever to face famine!). Second, sadly, it seems to be human nature that, whatever weight we lose in fasting, we quickly put back on once we resume our previous diet. One national level leader who’s known for his frequent long fasts actually seems to have gotten significantly *more* overweight as the years have rolled on.

Now, the upside of this truism is that we really *can* let God know that we’re doing this because we want deeper desperation for and connection with him. This really is about more than body image.