

Ryan Skoog, Peter Greer,
and Cameron Doolittle

Foreword by John Mark Comer

LEAD
WITH
PRAYER

THE SPIRITUAL HABITS OF
WORLD-CHANGING LEADERS

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Ryan Skoog,
Peter Greer, and
Cameron Doolittle
with Jill Heisey

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THE LEADERS IN THIS BOOK

In writing this book, we had the immense privilege of learning from many whom we admire for their prayerful leadership. We're grateful to those who generously shared their time, anecdotes, and wisdom with us in first-person interviews, as was the case with most contemporary leaders on this list. In a few cases, and certainly with respect to historical figures, we relied on public sources. Below is a list of these leaders, along with the chapters in which they're discussed.

Christine Baingana (chapter 4)
Mark Batterson (chapter 11 and conclusion)
Richard Beaumont (chapter 10)
Terry Boynton (chapter 2)
Brother Andrew (chapter 7)
Brother Lawrence (chapter 3)
Christine Caine (chapter 12)
Regi Campbell (chapter 12)
Francis Chan (chapter 1)
John Mark Comer (chapter 2)
David Denmark (case study)
Joni Eareckson Tada (chapter 5)
Mary Elizabeth Ellett (chapter 14)
Ganesh (chapter 5)
David Green (chapter 3)
Gary Haugen (chapter 14)
Ignatius of Loyola (chapter 8)
Jean (chapter 8)
Patrick Johnson (chapter 9)

Rob Ketterling (chapter 8)
John Kim (chapter 1)
Peter Kubasek (chapter 13)
Terry Looper (chapters 5 and 7)
Tim Mackie (chapters 6 and 10)
André Mann (chapter 12)
Jay Martin (chapter 14)
Alexander McLean (chapter 6)
Don Millican (chapter 4)
Judah Mooney (chapter 13)
Mother Teresa (chapter 1)
Florence Muindi (chapter 11)
George Müller (chapter 7)
Ibrahim Omondi (chapter 1)
John Ortberg (chapter 4)
Pavel (chapter 9)
Todd Peterson (chapter 11)
John Piper (chapter 6)
Jamie Rasmussen (chapter 8)
Rosebell (introduction and chapter 1)
Hala Saad (chapter 10)
Steve Shackelford (chapter 11)
Shalom (chapters 2, 13, and 14)
Priscilla Shirer (chapter 7)
David Sykora (chapter 12)
Aila Tasse (chapter 7)
Jon Tyson (chapter 14)
Evelyn Underhill (chapter 10)
Justin Whitmel Earley (chapter 4)
Dallas Willard (chapters 3, 9, and 10)
David Wills (chapter 12)
Japhet Yanmekaa (chapters 6 and 9)
Zehra (chapter 3)
Mark Zhou (chapter 3)
Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (chapter 14)

NOTE ON ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES

More than a book that you are about to read, we want *Lead with Prayer* to be highly practical. It's our privilege to provide supplementary tools and resources to help you develop your prayer life and a culture of prayer in your organization.

On our website, www.leadwithprayer.com, you'll find:

- A free deck of prayer cards to develop your prayer life and teach those you lead how to pray
- A personal prayer assessment tool
- An organizational prayer assessment tool
- Suggestions for further reading to deepen your prayer life
- Case studies of prayerful organizations
- Bonus interview content
- A link for making bulk purchases of *Lead with Prayer* for your team or network

In addition, we realized that organizations have systems for (almost) everything that matters: accounting systems for managing money, HR systems for serving employees, messaging systems for communication. *But most of us have no system for the most important process in our ministry: the prayer process.*

We have partnered with Echo Prayer to create a **prayer request distribution app**, as well as other tools that will help leaders implement prayer systems. We believe these tools provide “handles” to help leaders

move from just talking about prayer to equipping organizations and teams to more fully practice prayer.

Of course, prayer itself is a relationship, not a piece of software or a process! But we learned from praying leaders that a system can streamline gathering, filtering, and sharing prayer points across a team. And so we've created what we believe are simple and structured ways to invest in prayer. Learn more on our website.

A portion of the proceeds from this book will fund global prayer movements.

INTRODUCTION

LEADERS HAVE A PRAYER PROBLEM

Don't let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me.

—*Jeremiah 9:23–24 NLT*

Oh no! I've lost Billy Graham!"

The security guard panicked. He had one job to do: watch the backstage of the auditorium to make sure Billy Graham was safe. He had walked out the door for a moment to check the alleyway, then returned back inside—and in that brief moment, he lost the world's most famous preacher.

Searching backstage, he heard a desperate voice crying out from the catwalk, and when he climbed to the top, he found Billy Graham on his face, pleading in prayer, "God, I cannot do this without You! God, I need Your strength and power to speak today."¹

That day Billy Graham was preparing to address a midsize group of leaders for only fifteen minutes.

If anyone could deliver a fifteen-minute talk in his own strength or gravitas, it would have been Billy Graham, an incredibly talented orator who literally spoke to millions of people, and met and talked with the most powerful leaders on earth.

But instead, Billy Graham prayed as if the exact opposite were true. He fell on his face, crying out desperately to God. Despite his experience, qualifications, and position as a global leader, Billy Graham lived with a heightened awareness of his reliance on God: an awareness evidenced in his prayer life.

Billy Graham seemed to take Jesus at His word when He said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). But based on recent studies, it’s clear that few lead out of a similar conviction today. Collectively we’ve lost the essence of Billy Graham: his prayerful dependence on God to sustain his leadership.

The Dispiriting Studies on Prayer

Personally and anecdotally we know that Christian leaders often lead out of our own strength, dedicating significant time to research, strategy, and discussion before rounding out our efforts with a quick prayer for God to bless our plans.

Studies of Christian leaders have drawn the same conclusion: By and large, they report lackluster prayer lives. One study, for example, showed that only 16 percent of pastors are very satisfied with their prayer lives.² Another study revealed that 72 percent of pastors identify “consistency in personal prayer” as one of the greatest needs they must address.³ When it comes to prayer, the gap between where we are and where we want to be is vast.

Expanding beyond pastors, a large foundation in the United States commissioned a top-tier research firm to investigate prayer practices within Christian organizations. They invested six figures in both quantitative and qualitative research to understand how these organizations prayed and what the impact of prayer was on their mission and staff.

Researchers compiled a list of 200 Christian organizations that publicly touted a culture of prayer. This select group was meant to represent the vanguard of organizational prayer, and everyone involved in the

study eagerly awaited the results to see what they could learn from these exemplars. The report captured some sad realities facing the Church and parachurch organizations. Specifically, that intentional corporate prayer is the exception and not the norm in Christian organizations.⁴

If this is the disappointing reality about prayer among pastors and leading organizations, how much bleaker is the landscape for everyone else? And if Christian leaders aren't praying, what is the impact on the environments and teams they lead?

Crisis Level

This is no small issue, because there are indeed consequences when leaders do not pray. As the late pastor Tim Keller warned, prayerlessness is *detrimental* for a Christian, but it's *death* for a Christian leader.⁵ "Prayerlessness will kill you. It won't just hurt you; it'll kill you," he told a group of Christian leaders. He went on, "The more successful your church [or organization, or small group] is, the more likely you're going to feel too busy for [prayer]. And that's deadly...It is utterly deadly."⁶

And we see Keller's warning playing out as Christian leaders all around us publicly stumble and fall or succumb to burnout and resign their influential roles.

We also see it clearly in Scripture. We know the stories of the great leaders of the Bible, and that many of them stumbled. When leadership scholar J. Robert Clinton studied biblical leaders, he found that only 30 percent "finished well." He believes even fewer are finishing well today, and the connection to prayer is causal and clear: "In latter ministry, the tendency is to rely on competency, one's ability to do things, rather than primarily on God."⁷ For competent leaders, Clinton suggests, their "very strength becomes a weakness."⁸

Neglecting prayer is not just disastrous for leaders; it is disastrous for organizations, too. Just as plants eventually wilt without water, an organization that is not refreshed and nourished by prayer will grow

lifeless and lose its vitality. Divisions grow. Staff members become disgruntled and disengaged. Organizations increase in busyness but decrease in effectiveness. An organization that neglects prayer is actively decaying.

The Spark

Over the years, we (Ryan, Peter, and Cameron) have often discussed the personal and organizational ramifications of neglecting our prayer lives. Despite our growing awareness of the dangers, a single Bible verse brought the conviction that launched this book.

One day during my normal time of Bible reading, I (Ryan) read the words of 1 Samuel 12:23, in which the prophet and leader Samuel says to the people of Israel, “Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you.” I put down my Bible, stood up, and began pacing. Samuel’s words convicted me personally as a business and nonprofit leader, and they also seemed to issue a broader challenge to Christian leaders who have made prayer a last resort rather than a first priority. Questions flooded my mind: *Does God consider leaders’ failure to pray a sin against Him? Does He hold leaders to a higher standard when it comes to prayer?*

There are thousands of leaders talking about leadership, but what are the prayer lives that fuel their leadership?

And if prayer is the foundation of their lives as leaders, why don’t we hear more about it?

I decided to explore the prayer lives of leaders, and I invited Cameron and Peter into this exploration as fellow leaders of global nonprofits. We began by just asking each other, *What should a leader’s prayer life look like?* At first, the discussion was just for our own benefit and that of the organizations we lead: VENTURE, Practicing the Way, and HOPE International, respectively. But over time our discussion expanded to research, and we’ve spent the last three years investigating how world-changing leaders lead with prayer.

life. What might happen if we became not only leaders who pray but, more specifically, praying leaders? How would that change the way we pray, the way we lead, and the spiritual vitality of the organizations we serve?

Two Training Grounds

We found that praying leaders learned to pray mainly on two training grounds. The first is apprenticeship. The best way for a leader to become a praying leader is by learning from other praying leaders: replicating and modifying their habits, postures, prayers, and rhythms. The popular expression “more caught than taught” syncs with this idea of apprenticeship.

To apprentice under praying leaders, we prioritized firsthand interviews and extended observation so we could dig into the lives of these praying leaders, give concrete examples, and awaken a thirst like a deer thirsts for water (Psalm 42:1).

These praying leaders were on a journey to “train their souls,” constantly looking for new ways to pray, new prayers to guide them, and new ways to get Scripture into their hearts. They sought to spend more, not less, time in prayer, inventing new ways to remember and connect their souls with God throughout the day, week, and year. These practices, rhythms, and principles of praying leaders became the uniting undercurrents that propelled fruitful, thriving, lasting legacies of leadership.

The second training ground is at the feet of Jesus. There was a fire, beauty, and irresistibility to Jesus’ prayer life that drew the disciples to ask Him, “Teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). They are never recorded asking Him to teach them how to lead, speak, teach, or mentor. But they were compelled to ask Jesus to teach them prayer, because they saw that it was the foundation of Jesus’ life and leadership. Jesus often taught the importance of prayer, through both words and actions.

- Could you not pray with me one hour? (Matthew 26:40)
- “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Matthew 26:41).

- “This kind can only come out through prayer” (Mark 9:29).
- Abide in me; without me you can do nothing (John 15:5).
- The Father is always with me (John 8:29).
- “When you pray . . .” (Matthew 6:5).
- Jesus taught them that they should always pray (Luke 18:1).

It is profound to think that God came to Earth, walked among us, and taught us how to pray. Jesus’ prayer life in Scripture forms the core of all the habits we’ll explore, and so as we explore each habit, we will dive into its “Jesus origin.”

Christian Dawson, a pastor at Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon, described it this way: “The people who followed Jesus first were all taken aback by Jesus’ prayer life. They were fascinated by it. Jesus woke up early to pray. When He was exhausted, He’d get alone to pray. When He was successful, He’d get away to pray. When He was in trial, He stayed up all night to pray. It’s as if the first work and the last work that Jesus was up to was always prayer. Our Rabbi lived something that’s so easy to forget: Prayer, more than anything else, fuels our love for God, His people, and His mission in the world.”¹⁶

The disciples had watched Jesus pray and wanted their Rabbi to teach them directly, but we, too, can experience the beauty of learning to pray from our Lord Himself. Jesus is still teaching His leaders to pray. As a 1,500-year-old hymn so beautifully articulates, He is still our “best thought, by day or by night.”¹⁷

Scripture gives us another secret: Jesus is still praying for us right now, because He “lives to intercede” for us, even today (Hebrews 7:25).

Christian leaders do not need another pithy leadership axiom, as if one new insight were so profound it would change the face of Christian leadership. But if Christian leaders were to en masse develop dynamic prayer lives and instill this passion in those they mentor and lead, history and Scripture tell us that neighborhoods and nations would change for generations. As God told Israel, “If my people . . . humble themselves and pray and seek my face . . . then I will hear from heaven . . . and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

The whole of heaven is eagerly waiting for us to get on our knees.

PRAYER TOOL

Each chapter will end with practical tools to help you lead with prayer. Additional tools and resources are available at www.leadwithprayer.com.

While prayer in a Western context is often thought of as an individual activity, we encourage you to invite friends or colleagues into this pursuit. Who do you know who could help create meaningful changes in your prayer life? Invite them into this process, and consider reading this book together.

Authoring this book as a team has not only increased the joy of writing but also unquestionably helped us with the application. This book was written in community, and we encourage you to read it in community, too.

Lastly, we invite you to pray this book. Stop often and pray when you read an interview that ignites something in your heart. Pray one of the prayers you read. Pray through some of the psalms you see. We issue this invitation with confidence, because most of this content belongs not to us but to the saints we've encountered.

PART I

**HOW LEADERS
PRIORITIZE PRAYER**

CHAPTER 1

LEADERS “WASTE TIME” WITH GOD

The first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord.

—George Müller

Several years ago, I (Ryan) heard a story that has stuck with me ever since. A foreign president arrived early for his scheduled appointment with a South Korean pastor. To the president’s great frustration, the pastor’s assistant made him wait while the pastor concluded his hour of uninterrupted midday prayer. Nothing was to come between the pastor and this time reserved to be with God.

“Do you know who I am?” the president angrily demanded of the secretary.

The secretary tried to offer some perspective as she calmly replied, “Do you know who he is talking to right now?”

Few leaders adopt the perspective that this pastor and his assistant shared: that no earthly power or pressing demand takes precedence over spending time with the King of Kings.

Leaders have an overabundance of demands on their time. Packed schedules impose a practical barrier to becoming a praying leader. But this practical barrier is rooted in an ideological one: *We forget who we’re talking to.*

If we operate under the illusion that we are in control of our schedule, day, or organization, then why pray? If we believe we are in control, then we will struggle to see how prayer could be the best, most effective use of

our limited time. Prayer demands that we offer back to God the control that has been His all along.

I (Peter) confess that seeing prayer as a *first priority* has often been a struggle, although I *know* and would be quick to acknowledge the importance of prayer. Slowing down does not come easily, even when there are dedicated times and places for prayer.

Each quarter, HOPE International, where I serve, holds designated days of prayer. I faithfully attend, but on one day of prayer, when facilitators invited our team to find a quiet place for silent prayer, I remember spending my “prayer time” ruminating over the operational and staffing challenges HOPE was facing. I ventured outside for a walk but focused on trying to solve the problems myself.

By the end of the day, I had spent precious few moments in prayer as I paced the grounds. Instead, I found myself fixated on what *I* needed to do: strategizing, planning, and toiling—opting for human effort with a sprinkling of prayer pixie dust. At the end of the day, I had no peace and no clear direction. What I did have, perhaps for the first time, was clarity that I had a prayer problem and erroneous assumptions of who was in control.

The Hour That Saved a Decade

In my (Ryan’s) family we frequently recollect and recount one story to remind ourselves who is in control.

When I was a teenager, my dad launched a brand and grew a successful business. After ten years of long days, late nights, and crisscrossing the country, his startup was offered an exclusive deal with a major Fortune 100 company. This was the kind of deal wide-eyed entrepreneurs can only dream about when they eagerly launch their companies.

“Yes!” seemed the obvious answer, but my dad took the matter to prayer, remembering Proverbs 3:6: “In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” He prayed about the deal for one hour. With such an attractive offer on the table, that hour of prayer could have been seen as time better spent signing contracts and drafting press

releases. But while in prayer, my dad sensed clearly from heaven that he should turn down the deal, though he could not say why.

The Scriptures say, “You will . . . be led forth in peace” (Isaiah 55:12), and even though this deal looked irresistible on paper, my dad felt the opposite of peace. He turned down the offer. His business partner was livid as he reminded my dad, “This is what you’ve worked your entire life for!” But my dad held his ground.

Several months later, that same Fortune 100 company surprised Wall Street and the world by declaring bankruptcy after an unforeseen change in the industry. Had my dad signed the deal, this company would have taken his company down with it. That one hour dedicated to the Lord in prayer saved ten years of investment and scores of jobs my dad’s company had created.

Ever since that experience, there’s been no doubt in our family that time spent with God is never wasted.

The Data on Praying Leaders

Without exception, the praying leaders we interviewed would say that the most productive moments of their life are those spent with Jesus.

In mysterious and wonderful ways, these leaders can recount testimonies of how centering their leadership on prayer exponentially increased their impact, and research supports their anecdotal assertions. A privately commissioned study conducted by the Barna Group revealed encouraging results. Among organizations that prioritize prayer:

- 91 percent of respondents feel more aligned to the mission of the organization;
- 85 percent believe God is more clearly accomplishing His work through the ministry;
- 78 percent agree that they feel “less stressed in [their] day to day responsibilities” due to corporate prayer; and
- 70 percent agree that their “productivity has increased.”

PRAYER

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!

You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you.

In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created.

You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would have not been at all.

You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.

You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you.

I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

—*St. Augustine*

PRAYER TOOL

WALK WITH GOD GUIDE

Like Francis Chan and Rosebell, many of the leaders we interviewed use a daily walk to “waste time” with God and build upon their friendship.

Recent studies have shown that walking is one of the healthiest activities you can engage in for your mind, body, brain, and spirit.

Mental Health

Walking connects the right and left hemispheres of your brain, helping your brain get “unstuck.” It releases endorphins and fires up your neurotransmitters, providing greater clarity of thought.

Body Health

Taking a single step moves more than 200 bones and 600 muscles in the human body, pushes blood through the cardiovascular system, and fires up the nervous system to keep you loose.

Brain Health

Walking regularly improves memory, fights rigidity in your brain, and helps long-term brain function and health in myriad ways.

Spiritual Health

Most saliently, walking with God and praying is one of the easiest ways to expand your prayer life. You are engaging both sides of your brain in communion with God. So, regardless of your default brain dominance, your whole self can engage with God in prayer.

HELPFUL TIPS TO WALK AND PRAY

- Verbally invite Jesus to join you on a walk.
- Take a Scripture with you and memorize it.
- Read a psalm several times over on a walk.
- Listen to a worship song while you walk.

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- Look at nature around you and compliment God on its beauty.
- Take time to listen.
- Repeat a simple phrase several times, like “God, I need You,” “Jesus, I love You,” or “Hallelujah.”
- Share your worries, fears, frustrations, anxieties, challenges, and struggles.
- Share your hopes, your dreams, what excites you, and what energizes you.
- Take time to pray for anyone you see on the walk to experience Christ.
- Reflect on your life, your family, and your ministry, and offer everything into Christ’s hands.

Find ways to enjoy and find joy in Jesus. Joy and friendship with Jesus are the lasting foundations of Christian leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ryan Skoog is a founder of several travel technology companies, including Faith Ventures and Yonder Travel Insurance. He also co-founded and leads the nonprofit VENTURE.ORG, which serves the tough places of the world by partnering with local leaders to plant thousands of churches and empowering these leaders to rescue girls from trafficking, start farms, initiate microenterprises, train in feminine hygiene, and serve war refugees. This leads to generational transformation in some of the unsafe, unreached, unresourced regions of the world. Ryan is the co-author of *Chosen* with Outreach Publishing.

Peter Greer is the president and CEO of HOPE International, a global Christ-centered economic development organization serving throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Prior to joining HOPE, Peter worked internationally as a microfinance adviser in Cambodia and Zimbabwe and as managing director for Urwego Bank in Rwanda. Peter has co-authored fifteen books, including *Mission Drift*, which was selected as a Book Award Winner from *Christianity Today*, *Rooting for Rivals*, *The Gift of Disillusionment*, and *The Spiritual Danger of Doing Good*.

Cameron Doolittle is senior advisor to the Maclellan Foundation, executive director of John Mark Comer's Practicing the Way, and co-founder of Generosity Path. He previously served as an advisor to senators, congressmen, and senior executives at Fortune 500 companies through his consulting firm, since acquired by Gartner. Cameron advises influential givers and great ministries. He now consults with organizations that his family loves, including BibleProject, Desiring God, Faith Driven, ECFA, Awana, *Christianity Today*, YoungLife, and others. He served as founding CEO of Jill's House, a ministry for kids with intellectual disabilities.