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**KINGDOM
COLLABORATORS**

**EIGHT
SIGNATURE
PRACTICES
OF LEADERS
WHO TURN
THE WORLD
UPSIDE DOWN**

Taken from *Kingdom Collaborators* by Reggie McNeal.
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PRAY WITH EYES WIDE OPEN

LIKE MANY PARENTS, Cathy and I routinely engaged our two daughters for prayer time as part of their bedtime ritual. Our younger daughter developed a habit of praying with her eyes open. One night I asked her why she did this. “Because I don’t want to miss anything,” she replied.

Kingdom leaders harbor the same desire. They’ve accepted God’s invitation to join him in his kingdom mission, to become kingdom collaborators. Their efforts bridge heaven and earth. Kingdom collaborators believe God is at work in every person they encounter and in every situation they face. This means they stay on the lookout for what God is up to. They don’t want to miss a thing!

How do kingdom leaders maintain this high God-alert status? This question brings us to the first and foundational element of eight signature practices that kingdom collaborators employ. These leaders believe that Jesus meant what he said when he instructed us to pray that God’s kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. Accordingly, they

listen for and *look for* God. These two dynamic engagements support God-conscious kingdom collaborators. They're learned attitudes and behaviors, not competencies relegated exclusively to a few from birth. Nor do these characteristics depend on some special spiritual dispensation. In other words, all of us can incorporate these practices into our thinking and living.

In this chapter, we'll examine how our spiritual hearing and sight can be improved.

Doing so will position us to be more effective collaborators with God in the kingdom that is unfolding all around us but can be missed if we aren't paying attention.

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ARE WE TALKING TO OR TALKING WITH GOD?

Some years ago, I arranged to have dinner with a counselor friend of mine since I was going to be in his city on a speaking engagement. We met at a restaurant close to his office so he could come straight from work. As we sat down at our table, I asked him, "Well, how was your day?" Instead of the usual "Fine. How was yours?" he said, "I just finished a counseling appointment with a couple I've been seeing for a while. As we got started in the session, I asked them how it was going for them. For the next solid hour, all I got to say was 'I see,' 'Really?' and 'Hmm' as they talked nonstop. At the end of our session, they stood to leave and said, 'Thanks so much! We feel so much better now!'"

My friend went on with a chuckle, “It’s like they upchucked all over me and just got up and walked out. I had plenty of feedback for them, but they never stopped talking long enough for me to get a word in edgewise! Oh well, they’ll be back, and maybe I’ll have a chance then.” We both had a laugh and then settled into a discussion over the menu.

It hit me later that what my friend experienced was how I was treating God in my prayer life. “Dear God,” would be followed typically by an “upchuck” of my life circumstances and needs. Once I finished updating God and offering him a few suggestions for how he could help me out, I’d wrap up the session “in Jesus’ name” and rush off without giving him a chance to say a word.

God patiently waited a lot of years to get a word in edgewise with me. I grew up hearing the stories of prayer giants. George Mueller praying for milk and bread to feed the orphans in his care. Martin Luther quipping, “I’ve got so much to do today that I need to spend the first two hours in prayer.” Billy Graham being caught prone and praying behind his desk. Perhaps all these stories are true, perhaps not. But I picked up one thing from being exposed to them: you need to pray a lot if you’re going to do something big with God. But I confess, I often wondered why these great people of the faith needed to spend so much time with God. What was taking them so long to say what they had to say?

Boy, did I not get it! You see, in the spiritual tradition and tribe I grew up in, prayer was talking *to* God, not talking *with* God. We had formulas for working our way through prayer using categories of praise, confession, and thanksgiving,

along with submitting requests (ACTS anyone?). Early in my writing career, my denomination asked me to write a set of lessons on prayer to serve as part of our Sunday school curriculum. I wrote thirteen weeks (a quarter's worth) of instruction on how to get the right stuff said and stuff said right when talking to God. Not one lesson I wrote raised the possibility that God may have something to say back to us. Sadly, no one noticed.

Talking *to* someone and talking *with* someone are two different dynamics. Only the latter employs the essentials of a genuine conversation. We've all been subjected to one-way verbal exchanges that left our need for conversation unmet. Either the other person talked nonstop without giving us a chance to say anything, or when we had the chance to speak, we knew she wasn't listening but was waiting for us to come up for air so she could take over again. In such cases, I typically lose patience and give up trying to have a conversation.

I'm afraid I've been guilty of both violations in my prayer life. Thankfully, God has much more patience than I do. He hangs in there, hoping I'll give him a chance to speak into my life.

Some years ago, I started listening more in prayer in case God has something to say to me. Turns out, he has plenty! I listen because there's no voice like his. His words penetrate to the core of my being, bringing calm, courage, correction, and confirmation like no one else or no other words can do. God sometimes uses Scripture to remind me of a truth he has already spoken. In other instances, he reminds me of things that people have said or brings to mind the words of

a hymn or song or something I've read. God also uses images to communicate. These may include memories of events and encounters that have something to contribute to the current conversation. They can also involve metaphors that help me picture God in our exchange (like a father, counselor, friend).

All these communications not only take aim at my rational mind; they often address my emotions, providing information and instruction for my soul that transcend words, touching my spirit, aligning my thoughts with his.

A few years ago I met with a few dozen church leaders in Portugal. The group represented a dozen European countries. One woman from a former Soviet country asked if she could share something with me to get my comments. I had become quite impressed with how this woman, high up in the government of her country, unapologetically displayed her Christian faith (quite a remarkable turnaround from Soviet days), so I was eager to hear what she had to say.

She took a piece of paper out of her purse that had a drawing on it. "I received this image from God in a dream," she said. "I don't quite know what it means, but I think it is a clue as to how I am to proceed with a national ministry of prayer." I told her that she had drawn a network system that was simple (but sophisticated) that would allow her to replicate her national prayer event (held in the capitol) in every region of her country if she built and staffed the system. She began to cry as we talked, telling me this very idea had been her vision for several years, but she had been unclear as to how to proceed. God had answered her in a dream with a network diagram! He loves to come to the aid of his kingdom leaders.

Other voices inside our heads also clamor for attention. Our self-talk channel runs 24-7, drawing from all kinds of sources: family, friends, critics, supporters, and what's transpiring around us, just to name a few. Some of these inputs are audio recordings that we play from our past—from people in our family of origin to significant people in our lives who have helped to shape our personal narrative (more about this later). And, without fail, the enemy of our soul also maintains an active channel where he pumps fear, confusion, doubt, guilt—all designed to create static so we don't hear the voice of calm, assurance, truth, love.

With all these competing voices in our head, how do we recognize the voice of God? We can always be sure that he speaks truth, so anything that doesn't square with his work is not from him. Also, his words always line up with his character. He doesn't say one thing and do another. His instruction and insight typically serve to heighten our relationship with and trust in him.

How do we put ourselves in a position to hear God's voice in our prayer life? We help ourselves to hear God by *expecting* to hear God. He won't usually force himself on us, but he wants to talk with us, so he patiently waits for our willingness to open up lines of communication. Our predisposition to obedience—an attitude of saying yes to what he says—also plays a big role in promoting a high-def signal.

Having said all this, know that hearing God requires practice. I think it was Luther who said, "There is one Voice that I have learned to hear above all others." Learning takes time and involves mistakes. We won't always get it right. But

we can be sure that God wants to be in conversation with us, so don't worry that your mishears will scare him off. Keep at it, striving to hear his voice. Jesus offered his encouragement to us, saying, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them" (John 10:27).

WHAT'S YOUR POSITION ON PRAYER?

This question isn't about our physical posture when we're in prayer (bowed head, kneeling, standing, prostrate—they all have their times). I'm thinking more about our perspective on the position we think we're in as we engage God.

An insight came to me as I listened to a professional executive coach make a presentation about what he called "the three levels of coaching." The first level, he said, involves identifying the problem. In this phase, the coach helps the client articulate the issue he or she wants to focus on. This clarification often helps the client move beyond the presenting problem to identify the real issues that are creating the dilemma. The coach then described the second level of coaching, where the coach assists the client in developing strategies for addressing the problem he or she has identified.

Then the coach began describing the third level of coaching. He commented that this level was more challenging than the first two, and rarely did the coaching make it to that level. He called this arena "the level of identity." In this phase, the coach helps the client deal with self-perceptions and personal elements that impact their situation. These discussions help the clients understand what *they* are contributing to the problems they face. What are their fears, for example?

Who are they unwilling to disappoint? Any number of issues can surface during this exploration. The coach also guides clients to claim the strengths they bring to the situation, helping them own the talent and expertise they possess that they can draw on to confront their situation.

As I heard this coach describe these levels that he moved through with his clients, I suddenly realized that he was describing various levels, or dynamics, of praying. This description actually captured the position many of us adopt as we communicate with God in prayer. Often we identify the problem to God as we see it (“Lord, I’ve got a problem,” followed by a summary of the situation). Next we outline several strategies he should consider in dealing with this (“would you just,” followed by our best ideas of what needs to be done or what outcome needs to be realized). We then punctuate our prayer with a fervent plea that he would hurry up and do something; or, if he can’t work on it right then, that he would help us have patience to wait it out.

But Jesus didn’t pray this way at all. He had a very different approach. He prayed from his position of identity—as a son talking with his dad. He didn’t dwell on clarifying problems or identifying strategies for the Father. His petitions were borne out of his relationship with God, not pled as a beggar or as a desperately hopeful player of the prayer lottery.

Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in his last hours, when he was in the throes of his passion. In his high priestly prayer, he began his conversation in Gethsemane with “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you” (John 17:1). Later, on the

cross and with his last breath, he shouted, “Father, into your hand I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). The Son was always in conversation with his Father.

Jesus taught his disciples to do the same. When they asked him to teach them to pray, it wasn’t as if they had never prayed before. It’s just that they had never prayed like *he* prayed. So he gave them the biggest lesson up front by telling them to open their prayers with “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9). These are words that reveal a relationship, that reveal *our* identity. We are God’s children. This is the position we hold. This perspective colors everything about our conversations with him.

I can take the typical approach in my prayer life of updating God on my finances (or whatever) and asking him to help if he wants to (I know he can). Or I can take the position of a son and say, “Father, I want to thank you for always meeting my needs. I look forward to being amazed at how you are already moving to make provision again. Your constant provision helps me love you even more.” What a difference this kind of praying makes! Anxiety over my problems gives way to celebration and confidence as I speak as God’s son. Prayer becomes a reminder of my identity. It moves from being merely a session to launder requests before God to a venue where identities are nurtured and bolstered.

WHAT TIME DO YOU PRAY?

God engages us from our future.

We all have had experiences of learning something just before we needed to know it or meeting someone in the “nick

of time” who became vital to our next assignment. Are these coincidences? Hardly! God is operating in our lives from where we are headed—what we call our future. He is the ultimate begin-with-the-end-in-mind guy! Since he knows where we’re headed, he shepherds us along our paths and dials into our life so we experience exactly what we need for our next chapter.

We tend to think that our past prepares us for the future, because that’s how we experience it. The reality is the other way around: future challenges inform today’s preparation so we can meet them. This makes God the ultimate trusted source for helping us understand what to do right now, because only he has worked through our future. His instructions are so that we can be better prepared for what’s headed our way.

This perspective provides us another motivation for listening to God. And it also changes the way we listen. For much of my life, my prayers involved updating God, bringing him up to speed on what was happening in my life so I could ask for his help. Now I know that prayer is God’s gift to me for updating *me* on what’s happening, for bringing *me* up to speed, for helping *me* see what *he* is up to.

The understanding of time that has emerged in quantum theory helps us understand this perspective. In Newtonian physics, time is a constant. Not so in a quantum world. Past, present, and future are all parts of the same reality. The future is incipient in the present; the past gives meaning to the present; one can’t be severed from the other. Though our experience is that we move from the past toward the future, it’s just as accurate to say that the future is hurtling toward us.

At whatever point God intersects time, the impact reaches across all time. The declaration of God that “I am the Alpha and Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come” (Revelation 1:8) is not just an allegory, but can be contemplated as reality in a quantum universe. The work of Jesus on the cross—his “it is finished”—counted for *all* time. While this event occurred in history, it’s also possible to talk of the Lamb slain “from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). The cross event displays how the future impacts the meaning of events.

Lots of people died on crosses in the Roman world. What made Jesus’ death significant was the cross’s silhouette against the future empty tomb. The resurrection secured the efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice. The empty tomb announced the future of sin and death.

The kingdom is a future that’s always invading the present. Every expression of good, of victory over evil, of transcendent beauty, points us forward to the kingdom. Every aspiration of hope is an echo of a preferred future pressing into today’s world. When worship transports us to a sense of timelessness or when we celebrate the death of saints (anticipation has turned to reality for them), these experiences point us to the future-breaking-into-the-present kingdom.

Haven’t you had the experience of thinking about a person only to run into or hear from him shortly thereafter? Or perhaps you’ve called someone who starts a phone conversation with “Have your ears been burning?” or tells you that



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you had been on her mind. These seemingly random and sometimes mysterious occurrences point us to one significant reality of quantum spirituality: our inner being can vibrate and resonate—pick up signals—from what’s happening across space and time.

In one of his famous miracles, Jesus pointed to the dynamic I’m describing. The cursing of the fig tree (Matthew 21:18-20; Mark 11:12-14, 20-21) actually involved a fast-forwarding of the future. The tree in the episode was dying—made plain by Mark’s reference to the fact that it wasn’t the time of year for figs (in fact, it also wasn’t the time of year for leaves). The tree was seriously and obviously out of round, “acting out” with its display of leaves with no accompanying fruit. It was in the early throes of death.

Jesus merely called the future into the present. What did his disciples remark about this episode? Not “you killed that fig tree!” but “how did the fig tree wither so quickly?” (Matthew 21:20). And they observed that the tree had withered from its roots (Mark 11:20), an indication of the inevitability of the tree’s death, just fast-forwarded by Jesus.

In both Matthew and Mark, this episode immediately led into a discussion of prayer. Jesus told them that in prayer we have the ability to hurry along the future (mountains falling into the sea was activity associated with eschatological visions of the end of time). If the whole encounter had been about judging a tree for not having fruit (when it shouldn’t have anyway), the teaching on prayer would make little sense.

However, if the incident demonstrates the power of God to bring future realities into the present, the teaching on

prayer helps us grasp its meaning and power as a kingdom activity. If we can capture what God wants to do in a situation, what outcome he would prefer, how he is working, our agreement with him in our praying releases the power to align the present with the preferred future.

Jesus demonstrated the power of this perspective in his great high priestly prayer in John 17. He reminisced about the future in order to draw strength for his passion: “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5). Past, present, and future all became one as Jesus thought about where he was headed. Recalling that destination gave him what he needed to face what we can’t even imagine. And because he found what he needed to get through it, the kingdom of God triumphed over the usurper kingdom that had diminished life as God intends.

Recalling Jesus’ experience provides even greater incentive for us to engage in prayer more—but not in a manner that rehearses the past. The perspective I’m talking about gives us a much more robust prayer life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed his disciples not to babble like pagans in prayer—“for your Father knows what you need before you ask him”—but to get straight to fast-forwarding the future: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:8, 10).

I can’t recount the number of times I’ve received a heads-up from the Spirit while in a listening mode. The most significant was a week when I felt in my spirit that there was a gathering storm, a leadership challenge headed my way in

the ministry assignment I held. Over a period of days, the size and shape of the challenge became clearer. By the time it emerged from underground meetings to create a public crisis, I had been steeled for the encounter. The voice of God to me was both direct and mediated through a series of unsolicited notes I received from prayer warriors sharing their strong impulses and pointing me to specific Scripture passages that had been impressed on them. The whole sad tale was the most excruciating leadership episode of my life, but also one of the most robust periods of prayer I've experienced.

I'm not a mystic or clairvoyant. I claim no special unction or gift. And those who know me would certainly tell you I don't possess a spiritual prowess that sets me up for hearing from God. I've just learned to listen. His thoughts and insights are promised to us all (James 1:5); it's just a matter of tuning in.

Listening to God in our prayer life helps us be better situated for our challenges as kingdom leaders. It attunes us to the future God wants us to have. If we listen to God in prayer, he can help us catch up to what he's doing. Kingdom leaders consciously or intuitively have figured this out.

WHAT'S NEW WITH YOU?

Kingdom collaborators hear from God because they've learned to *listen*. But they've also learned to *look* for God. They see him everywhere and in every situation, especially in the lives of people around them. God sightings are more common for those who intentionally practice looking and who learn how God most often shows up.

I often suggest to people that, when looking for God, they should look at the *new* things going on in their lives. That new challenge, new opportunity, new problem, new relationship, new whatever, is most likely where God is at work. Why do I say this? Because I believe God prefers new.

We don't automatically associate new with God. Most people think of God as old. I understand why. He's been around a long time, and Sistine Chapel depictions and other artists' renderings typically show him with a long, white beard. But a timeless being doesn't age. God simply *is*. Artists could just as easily paint him as someone in his strapping youth. There's no real damage here one way or the other, except that the perception that God is old can get in our way of seeing him. It can cloud our thinking. When we think of him as old, we tend to think of him as if he lives in the past and is threatened by having to cope with new challenges just like we are.

This perception can cause us to think that God has been painted into a corner with our situations and is striving to overcome challenges and circumstances he didn't anticipate. We can find ourselves praying to a God who needs our help in strategizing and implementing solutions. We wind up using prayer to inform God rather than to be informed by him.

From Genesis to Revelation, "new" is the take on God. The creation of the universe was new when it happened, as was each order of design and being—especially human beings, who uniquely are made in the image of God. The God who declares, "See, I am doing a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19), doesn't cease his creative activity once the book of beginnings comes to a close.

The Old Testament is full of new activity on God's part. He even does some repeat acts in new ways. For instance, when Moses led the liberated slaves out of Egypt, their first stop was the Red Sea. At a seeming dead end, God made passage for them to walk on dry ground through water stacked up on both sides so they could escape the pursuing Egyptians.

A generation later, the Israelites would enter the Promised Land through another dry crossing. This time God accomplished the feat through a different approach. He dammed up the river miles upstream, only commencing the process when the priests led the way by putting their feet in the water. It took some time for the river to run dry; those priests had to be sopping wet—and relieved—by the time the water receded.

Why would God pull off a dry-ground crossing in two different ways? I think one answer is that every generation needs its own dry-ground crossing. Those entering Canaan needed a different story to tell than an old dramatic episode. So do we! We need to see God act in our own day and time in ways that make sense in our current reality. The challenge to do this doesn't intimidate him. In fact, he has set it up this way! A totally predictable God would leave very little room for faith. And, the Scripture says, without faith it is *impossible* to please God (Hebrews 11:6). So God keeps sending new things our way to build our faith muscles as we respond to fresh challenges and opportunities. He also sends new mercies. Anyone want old manna?

The New Testament offers many other glimpses into the preference of God to be at work in new ways. The incarnation

and Pentecost certainly sit at the top of the list of examples. Others include Jesus instructing his disciples with a new command and a new covenant (John 13:34; Mark 14:24). We are *new* creatures in Christ, the apostle Paul said (2 Corinthians 5:17). And John on Patmos tells us we're headed to a new heaven, where we will receive not only new resurrection bodies but a new wardrobe (Revelation 3:4) and new names (Revelation 2:17). And in a moment tying the end of the Bible to the beginning, God declared, "I am making everything new" (Revelation 21:5).

Adopting the perspective that God is at work in the new does something inside us. It builds faith, but it also does something beyond us. It allows us to become voices of hope and opportunity in our communities. Most people look at what they see as intractable problems—issues like generational poverty and homelessness—and wonder if things can ever be any different or better. Kingdom leaders, on the other hand, look at the same situations and see new options—because they see *God* at work. While others wring their hands in the face of daunting challenges, kingdom collaborators are busy helping people experience the life God intends for them. They are demonstrating kingdom leadership.

Throughout this book, you'll hear stories of some of these leaders and the remarkable work they're doing. They are captured and motivated by the vision of a better world. They see people enjoying better lives in every arena: spiritual, educational, health, financial, relational—all the ways that people pursue life. They also see better communities that support life as God intends. Their vision compels them to collaborate

with God and others to work for their vision to become reality. They lead with confidence, because they see God.

The kingdom of God is an unfolding reality, informed by a sure and certain future. We know how it all ends. The kingdom *will* come. We need leaders who participate in and help us experience the kingdom now—on earth as it is in heaven. They accomplish this by listening for and looking for God. These leaders' prayer lives support their efforts as they collaborate with God and others to bridge heaven and earth.

It's been decades now since Cathy and I prayed with our girls when they climbed into bed at night. But the lesson I learned one of those nights still resonates with truth. We should be careful not to miss God at work in his kingdom around us. He has invited us to collaborate with him in his great redemptive mission.

Kingdom collaborators pray with their eyes wide open!

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