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21 Days to Childlike Prayer

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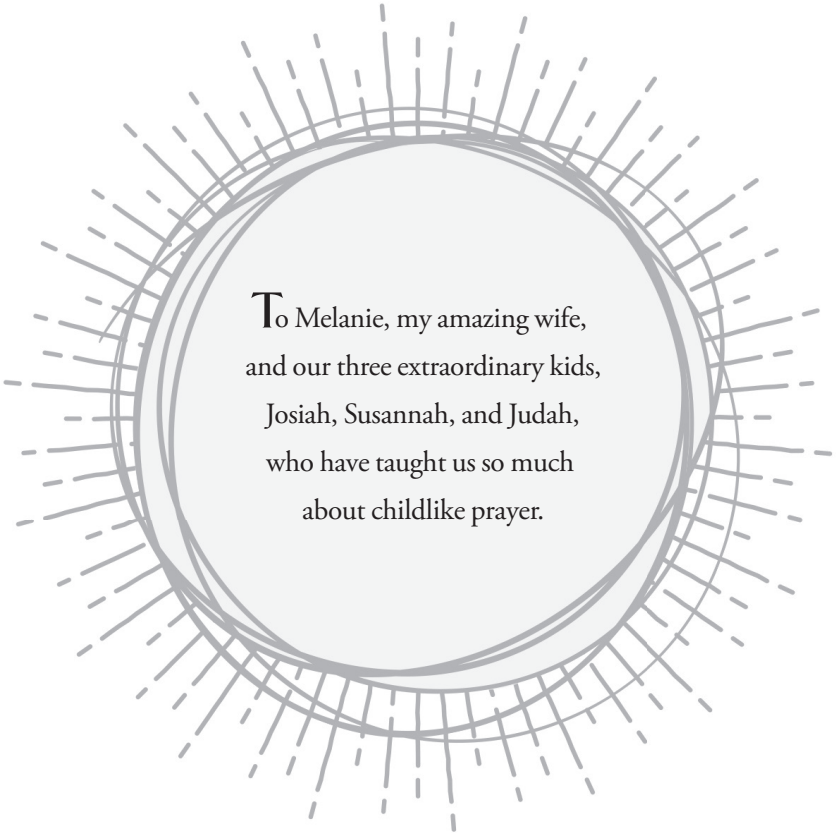
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To Melanie, my amazing wife,
and our three extraordinary kids,
Josiah, Susannah, and Judah,
who have taught us so much
about childlike prayer.



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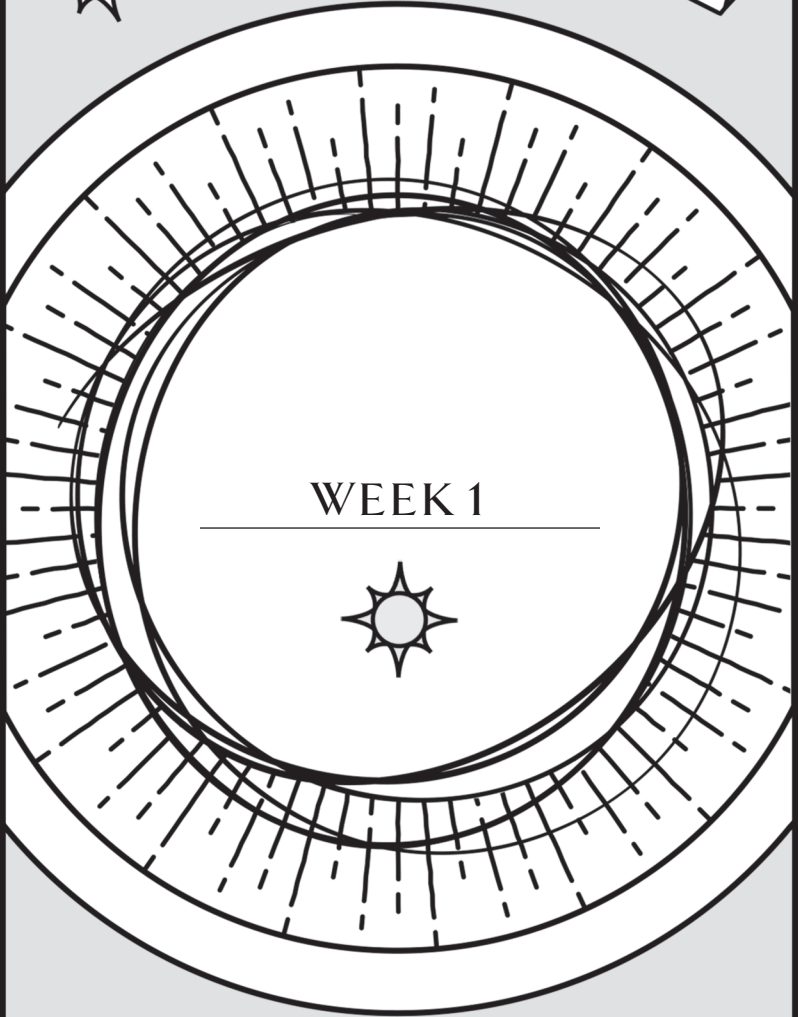
I can't put into words the heartfelt love and gratitude I have for the people of Redemption City Church, who have taught me and walked with me through so much. Thank you for your patience and for being a people of childlike, specific prayer.

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INTRODUCTION AND FOUR FOUNDATIONAL CHILDLIKE PRAYER PRINCIPLES

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

J.I. PACKER

*I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

PSALM 121:1-2



I love talking about prayer. I get energized helping people who have never had a meaningful, daily, purpose-focusing, peace-producing, exciting prayer life learn how to start one. My days get brighter when I hear stories of specific answers to prayer from people who can't believe "this thing (prayer) works!" Prayer is my passion.

But most people don't feel this way about prayer. For most Christians I know, prayer is the last thing they'd choose to read a book about. Someone

would have to talk them into picking up a book like this. You might even know that prayer is something you *should* do, but you just never end up actually doing it.

For what it's worth, if I just described you or something that's close to you, I understand the struggle. I'm not looking self-righteously down on you. I get it. Because prayerlessness was the norm for most of my Christian life. The gap between what I knew I *should* be doing and what I was actually doing was vast.

And this prayer gap that existed in my life wasn't there because I didn't own a lot of books on prayer. I did! My days started without expectant prayer in a house with all kinds of prayer classics. Like you, I also had plenty of access to the Internet's endless resources on prayer. I even studied prayer in seminary. I knew a lot of great quotes that I could share on social media platforms. And I certainly knew that the Bible talked a lot about it, and I could even quote a verse or two on the spot.

But I didn't have a prayer life. Or I should say, I didn't have much of a prayer life. I struggled. And by struggled, I mean I failed and it didn't matter much to me in my day-to-day.

But there remained this uneasiness about my prayerlessness that would show up on the rare occasions that I actually thought about it. I knew that Jesus was all about prayer. I could quote the scriptural commands to pray.

And I certainly was aware of the incredible ways God answered prayers throughout the Bible. A quick look at the lives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Nehemiah, Elijah, Daniel, Esther, Deborah, Peter, and Paul highlights the fact that God loves to unleash his stunning power for undeserving people who pray. I wondered if God might still do stuff like that.

Thankful to say, God didn't leave me in my prayerlessness. Unfortunately, it took a lot of pain to close the prayer gap in my life. Early on in the life of the church I started, I went through one of those worst-case scenario after worst-case scenario kind of seasons in life. Mistakes were made, relationships ruined, and the young church that I started was being led by someone who couldn't find his way out of the fog of depression. While what I went through wasn't anything close to what Job went through when he lost everything, my heart felt something of what he felt when he

said, “The thing I feared has overtaken me, and what I dreaded has happened to me” (Job 3:25 CSB).

The reason I’m so thankful for that awful season is because, in that season, God changed my life by changing my prayer life. And he changed my view of prayer because he changed my view of him. My problems positioned me to see God in a fresh way that made prayer finally make sense to my busy twenty-first-century life. I learned more about him and, consequently, more about myself. And the more all of these things fell into place, the more I was able to pray in a way that helped me face chaotic situations without a chaotic heart and encounter discouraging circumstances with a heart full of courage. I found my prayer life focusing me and inspiring me, enabling me to take on larger challenges personally and professionally with an inner peaceful steadiness.

I believe I experienced something of what the apostle Paul was talking about in 2 Corinthians 12:10 (CSB), where he said he “delighted” or took “pleasure” in “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Why would Paul “delight” in those awful things that we all want to run from? Because Paul knew that in those horrible seasons, there was a unique, awe-inspiring experience of Jesus that he couldn’t experience outside of those seasons. Jesus turns our problems into platforms—platforms where we can experience more of his power, grace, love, wisdom, and direction.

That was true for me in my difficult time. Jesus met me in my nightmare.

One of the greatest guides God used to help me grow through that challenging season was a guy named Paul Miller. He wrote a book called *A Praying Life*, and in it he shared how God used the immense challenges of raising a daughter with Down syndrome to teach him to pray. God used his problems to position him to see and experience Jesus in a way that changed his prayer life.

Over the years, I’ve recommended his book to as many people as would listen (and I still do!). But I also discovered along the way that God had started writing a unique story in my life that he might want me to share. God seemed to be leading me to tell others what he’d been showing me, what he’d been using in other people’s lives—something that might

help individuals, families, friends, coworkers, teams, groups, churches go through a journey together that would enable them to become more joyful, courageous, peaceful, purposeful, loving, and productive.

Over the past several years, I have seen prayerless people start to pray and see actual specific answers to prayer over and over. From the gift of millions of dollars of land, to raises at work, to book deals, to DMV lines moving quickly (If God can do that, he can do anything!), to greater experiences with God, to the conscience of lost people—just to name a few—we have seen thousands and thousands of specific answers to prayer. As people learned to pray, Jesus became real to them in their day-to-day living in a way that he had never been. And when Jesus became real in that way, peace became possible to them in places they never thought it could, joy was present in their hearts even in the face of potential failures, and hope marked their outlook as they attempted great things. They found more of the life that Jesus died to purchase than they ever thought possible.

I'm praying that God would use this book to do the same for you as well. I'm praying that Jesus becomes so real to you that you talk to him in prayer every day, that you see specific answers to prayer, and that you too feel comfortable helping others experience Jesus through prayer.

Am I promising that God will answer all of your prayers like you want? Absolutely not. While we have seen thousands upon thousands of specific answers to prayer, we have seen tens of thousands of specific *nos* to prayers. More of our requests are denied than are granted. Why? As we'll see this week, not because God doesn't love us, but because it's not what's best for us. His *nos* are always an "I have something better that you can't see."

I believe that 21 days from now anyone who reads, engages in the process, and applies what they learn in this book will be able to pray in a way that enables them to experience God's power in their day-to-day life as we have. That's right, anyone. Why? Because the secret to a "daily, life-giving, see-specific-answers-to-prayer" prayer life isn't found in becoming more spiritually sophisticated. It only requires that we become more childlike.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray in what has now become his famous "Lord's Prayer," he pointed them toward the Father-child relationship. "Our Father..." Jesus tells his disciples to pray (Matthew 6:9). Why? Because the nature of the relationship determines the nature of the

communication. Kids talk to their parents in a way that you can't talk to their parents. Right? Jesus doesn't want his listeners to think they need to become superstar Christians in order to pray like he wants them to pray. Jesus just wants them to start acting like a child.

Over the next 21 days, I'm going to do my best to take you on a journey into childlike prayer. I want to help you learn what I learned without having to go through what I went through. When we embrace childlike prayer, we find ourselves in a new story where anything is possible, where we always get what's best, where miracles happen every day, and where problems are opportunities for a greater experience of Jesus.

I'd encourage you to do your best to read it with someone else. Whether it's a close friend, a family member, a team, a group, a staff, or a church, any group that pursues childlike prayer together will see more of Jesus than they would if they just pursued it on their own. When Jesus started out his instructional prayer with an "our," he was pointing us toward a place where our community—whatever size or type of community that is—knows of specific, awesome answers to prayers that have happened in their midst. Just as Israel and the early church had unique, inspiring, faith-feeding stories about how God answered their prayers, Jesus wants your friend group, church group, work group, family, or whatever your group looks like to have unique, inspiring, faith-feeding stories.

Let me challenge you to come up with a "Top 10" requests list. If you're going through this book with others, make two "Top 10" prayer request lists, one public and one private. These requests can be problems that are pressing in on you right now as you read. They may come from any area of life. They can also be plans that you would love to see fulfilled. They don't have to be spiritual. Any decent dad wants to help his kids in any area of life they are interested in—so long as they're not harmful to them. God is a perfect Father, perfect in love, mercy, generosity, and joy, and he isn't turned off by requests for "nonspiritual" things.

Because I know that many people in our groups are not next-level readers, I've written each chapter in a way that one should be able to read it in ten to fifteen minutes. Add that up over 21 days and it isn't much more time than you'd spend watching a couple of your favorite movies.

This first week, we'll explore the Lord's Prayer. I'll show you that prayer

can simply be understood as God's children talking to their heavenly Father about what they think is best. To help remember the key elements that make this communication happen, I've created the following acronym that we'll unpack over the course of this first week:

FOUR FOUNDATIONAL CHILDLIKE PRAYER PRINCIPLES

- B—Believe God can do anything.
- E—Embrace your childlike identity.
- S—Specify your requests.
- T—Trust God to do what's best with your requests.

Start praying that God would help you incorporate these key elements of prayer into your life. To help, I'll include this acronym at the end of each day's reading, serving as a daily prompt to pray like God's child.

The second week, you will learn how to put the principles you learned in week one into practice. You'll learn about the "Six Childlike Prayer Practices," which are necessary to make this experience with Christ more than a 21-day experience. Don't make this journey the finish; make it the start of something new and life-changing.

During the third week, we'll continue to think more deeply about the Lord's Prayer and how it reveals five characteristics that mark the blood-bought identity of every child of God. Learned into your heart, while also pointing your attention to the most strategic prayers God's children can pray. Here, you'll learn "Five Specific Childlike Identity Prayers." Christians who learn to pray these prayers will see how childlike prayer positions them to live the life their heavenly Father created them to live each day. They'll learn to change their world in just a few moments at the start of every day.

For 21 days, step away from your phone a little more, turn off the TV a little sooner, and follow God into childlike prayer. What kind of stories of answered prayer might you have three months from now if you really embrace this challenge? What might God do in your relationships, work, group, or church if you said no to a few things over the next 21 days so that you could say yes to this 21-day challenge?

I'm praying that God would answer specific prayer requests for each person that goes through this journey. I'm asking God to surprise you in ways that lift your heart, enable you to take on the impossible, unite your life more meaningfully with those you go through this with, and trust God with all your problems and plans.



DAILY REFLECTION

When and where will you read the daily text and engage in its exercises?

If you're going through this journey with a group, how will you talk about it? Daily? Weekly? Over lunch? Breakfast? Through text thread?

What are the reasons for your "prayer gap"?

What are you putting on your "Top 10" prayer lists publicly? What about your private "Top 10" prayer requests?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

DAILY PRAYER

God, I need your help to make it through this 21-Day Childlike Prayer Challenge. Will you cause me to get off to a great start? Will you help me identify and overcome the obstacles that get in the way? Will you cause my heart to believe that there are no prayer requests too small for you to care about, and that there are no prayer requests too big for you to handle in a moment without any effort? Enable me to believe you can truly do anything. Help me embrace a childlike identity, specify my prayer requests, and trust you to do what's best with my requests. With the psalmist, we pray, "Let your work be shown to your servants" (Psalm 90:16). While we don't know what your answers to these requests will be, thank you for always doing what's best for your children. Amen.





DAY 2

BELIEVE GOD CAN DO ANYTHING

*Oddly enough, many people struggle to learn how to pray
because they are focusing on praying, not on God.*

PAUL MILLER

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”*

PSALM 126:1-2



My oldest son, Josiah, was unusually quiet on the ride home from baseball practice. He was still at that age where baseball was basically a bunch of cute kids running around in the dirt, ignoring parents whose patience was running short. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

Normally, on the ride home, Josiah would tell me what his teammates were talking about. A new joke he learned. How he thought he played. A funny noise he heard. Smells he smelled. And other interesting details on which five-year-old boys tend to focus. Not this time. He was dead silent.

But as we turned into the neighborhood, he finally leaned forward and said, “Dad, you threw the baseball *all* the way from first base to third

base in the air!” Looking into the rearview mirror with a bit of a curious smile, I said, “I sure did, bud.” He slowly leaned back and began to smile with the kind of “lost in the moment” smile you have when you see something awesome you’ve never seen before. Then he said, “Dad, is there anything you can’t do?”

I took another quick look in the rear-view mirror to see if he was joking, but he wasn’t. He was just smiling, staring out the window, enjoying, if for even a moment, the thought that his dad could do anything. It’s like he was looking at the world differently. From his view, there were as many possibilities in this new world as there were mountains in the Rockies—more than you can see, more than you can fathom.

That’s childlike faith.

Childlike faith happens when the children of God see God for who he really is. This perspective is so life-giving that it disorients you the moment it happens. When you see his unmatchable power, unsearchable knowledge, and unending love, hope surges through your heart like a lightning bolt.

I imagine that same kind of feeling was felt by the Israelites after they walked out of Egypt for the first time as free men and women. Even though they had been backed up to the Red Sea with the world’s most powerful military—the Egyptian army—approaching, God made a way for them to pass through the Red Sea. It marked every Israelite after.

Daniel, no doubt, and those aligned with Daniel felt it freshly in their heart as Daniel was helped out of the lions’ den where he spent the night making history by being the first person ever to come out of that den unharmed.

You have to think that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego certainly felt that my-God-can-do-anything childlike faith when they walked out of the fiery furnace they were thrown into because they wouldn’t turn from their God.

Lazarus knew what it was like to walk in childlike faith after Jesus brought him back from the dead.

Peter and those praying for Peter knew what it was like to believe in the God of the impossible, especially after being escorted out of a Roman prison the night before he was to be executed for being a Christian.

The Bible is filled with examples of God unleashing his power on behalf of his undeserving children. These are just a few. I bet they all had a smile like Josiah had that day, and perhaps a similar look in their eyes, the one that comes from the childlike belief that their God could do anything.

And here is the important thing to notice: These events didn't just happen to occur; they were important enough to be recorded in the Bible. Why? Our God described those events in Scripture for us so that we'd have that same feeling as we made our way through each day, the one Josiah had that day when he saw me do the impossible and throw the ball all the way across the infield.

That's one of the reasons why Jesus starts teaching his disciples about prayer by directing their focus to God's identity. He says, "Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9). Jesus wants us to know exactly who we are talking to in prayer from the very start. Because your view of God will determine your view of prayer. Your view of prayer reveals your view of God.

Paul Miller insightfully writes, "Oddly enough, many people struggle to learn how to pray because they are focusing on praying, not on God."¹ When you're having trouble with your prayer life, one of the main places you need to check is your view of God.

J.I. Packer agrees. He says, "People who know their God are before anything else people who pray...If there is little energy for such prayer, and little consequent practice of it, this is a sure sign that as yet we scarcely know our God."²

As we saw on the first day, when Jesus teaches us about prayer, he points our attention to the Father-child relationship. Because God is "our Father," he is "eagerly willing" to unleash his infinite power for the good of his kids.

When Jesus first spoke these words next to the Sea of Galilee, it wasn't common to speak of God as a father. There were no songs about a "Good, Good Father," and there were certainly no pieces of wall art in Jesus' childhood home that said anything about a heavenly Father. At that time, people employed many titles to describe God, but they didn't say "Father." That would have felt presumptuous.

Jesus is showing us a new way to relate to God, one that he alone,

through his life, death, and resurrection, makes possible. Jesus is taking people who are far from God and turning them into family.

Slow down for a second and think about that term *father*. Jesus, of course, knew that there are bad fathers. Perhaps you had one of them. But Jesus also knew that the normal father is someone who tries to do what's best for his kids. Even if he is limited, he is willing to help.

So if normal dads want to do what's best for their kids, how much more should we expect the perfect, heavenly Father to always do what's best for his kids? Jesus made this point to another audience filled with good folks like you and me. He said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11).

Jesus starts his teaching on prayer by clarifying how he wants his listeners to view the God to whom they are speaking. Because your view of God will determine your practice of prayer. And your practice of prayer will reveal your view of God.

But Jesus doesn't just tell us that we are talking to a God who is "Father," so we know he is willing to help. He also tells us that we are talking to a God who is "in heaven," so we know that he is able to help.

Over the years, some folks have told me that they thought the phrase "in heaven" made God seem distant. But that's not why Jesus used that phrase. "In heaven" isn't meant to communicate distance; it's meant to communicate competence. Because God is "in heaven," he is unstoppable.

Jesus is connecting the identity of the one we are speaking to in prayer with the God who "is in heaven and does whatever he pleases" (Psalm 115:3 CSB); the one for whom "all things are possible" (Mark 10:27); the one who easily brought about every miracle we find in Scripture. His power is unmatched and unending. He's unstoppable. And he never gets tired or needs a break when he does more in a moment than we can do in a lifetime.

Jesus wants us to know from the very beginning that we are speaking to a God who is endlessly capable and eagerly willing to do what's best for his kids. He wants us to have so high a view of God's power that we really believe he can make a difference in our lives, inner thought life, health, relationships, finances, work life, and more, and a high enough view of

God's love that we really believe he is eagerly working to do what's best in our lives.

Do you view God like this?

Most of us don't. We don't believe God can do absolutely anything. Sure, we don't say that. But that's what our prayerlessness proclaims. How do you know what your heart really thinks about God's ability or willingness to help you with your problems and plans? Look at your prayer life. If you are daily asking God for help, you have a heart that believes in God's ability and love. If you aren't asking, you don't.

When we say that we're too busy to pray, our lives are saying, "It is more productive for me to get to work than to ask God to help me with my work." That's not just a problem because we didn't pray. It shows that we aren't seeing who God is and what he can do rightly. It also reveals that we don't understand who we are either (but we'll talk about this more in the next chapter).

Jesus designed our prayer life to change our perspective. And at the heart of this change is a change about how we view God, from thinking he is unable or unwilling to help to knowing he is able and willing.

Jesus says that if you want to learn how to pray, you need start by battling to believe in the right God. He wants to make sure that you're thinking about the right God. The same God who could handle Egypt, Babylon, and Rome is present and able to handle your situations too. So sit back, smile, and as you look at your day, in your heart whisper to yourself, "My Father can do anything."

When you are growing in your belief that God can do anything, you need to grow in your belief in his power, his love, his grace, and his wisdom. When you believe in his power, you ask him to help you with specific situations in your day. When you believe in his love, you don't hesitate to ask for anything on your heart. When you believe in his wisdom, you trust him to do what's best.

The best place to foster this perspective is by looking to the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus saves those who put their trust in him because he lived the perfect life they failed to live, died the sinner's death they deserved to die, and was raised from the dead—showing that his payment on the cross was accepted.

Have you asked Jesus to be your Savior and Lord? He always answers that prayer yes!

When we place our hope in his finished work, Jesus says that we are *justified*, which means “declared righteous” in God’s courtroom. And we are adopted into Christ’s family. Every adopted child of God is given the Spirit who uses the Word of God, the people of God, and the situations in our lives to make us more like Jesus.

And one of the key ways we are transformed is by moving from being prayerless to prayerful. How? By changing the way we view God as we think about the gospel truths. Because God the Son, Jesus, was willing to die on the cross for sinners, we can never question his love. Because God the Son, Jesus, walked out of the grave, we should never question his power. And because no one foresaw all of this happening the way that it did, we should never question his wisdom.

The greater God becomes in your eyes, the more you will feel childlike faith welling up in your heart. This is a daily battle. Some days you will find it easier to see God in all his bigness, and other days you will struggle. But, as we’ll see in a few days, specific requests are one of the key ways to foster this childlike faith. Because specific requests lead to specific answers. And when God answers us specifically we see him in a way we never would without those specific requests. Specificity leads to visibility.

Let me share one of my favorite specific answers to prayer. I started talking with a couple, Frank and Francis Ingraham, about the congregation I lead, Redemption City Church, and about purchasing property for our church from them. They owned a large farm—a farm that I grew up working on. They were heroes to me. And they were at the end of their life, and the land would most likely be sold and turned into neighborhoods.

So, I asked Mr. Frank if they might be open to our church purchasing a piece of their property so that the things he invested in us all those years ago could continue in the life of a local church, long after they were gone, in the same fields we had worked in.

They were open to it, so we started a conversation that lasted several years. They wanted the church to buy an amount of land I thought was too much for us to afford. They didn’t need the money. They simply