

Watching God set people free is a deep passion for Jennifer Barnett. I have had the privilege of watching her lovingly lead people in times of prayer that have resulted in breakthrough moments in their lives. I am thrilled she has poured her heart and experience into *First Freedoms*. I have no doubt all who read this will be inspired and challenged to cultivate a deeper prayer life and walk with Jesus.

Dr. Darren Whitehead, senior pastor, Church of the City, Franklin, TN

There are some books that are meant to be read, and other books that are meant to be absorbed. *First Freedoms* falls in the latter category. It is both inspirational and instructional. It is deeply profound yet wonderfully practical. Whether you are a longtime follower of Jesus hungry to grow your friendship with God, a struggling Christian trying to connect with a God who seems distant, or a curious seeker in search of more, this book is for you. My life, ministry, and church family have been forever shaped and blessed by the realities that Jen puts forth in this book, and I am grateful that blessing is now available to you as well.

Dave Clayton, author of *Revival Starts Here* and pastor at Ethos Church, Nashville, TN

First Freedoms is the book every church leader should be fighting for and knows they need but has never had packaged like this. It's a beautiful thing to watch my friend Jennifer do what Jesus said and unite the church under a banner of freedom. She's doing it one prayer at a time, and every ministry leader needs to work through this book.

Rachel Faulkner Brown, director of Be Still Ministries and Never Alone Widows

In my experiences with both new and experienced Christians over the years, I've witnessed a disturbingly profound disconnect between the heart of the believer and the heart of God, accompanied by a growing despair that there should be so much more. Jennifer Barnett courageously leaps right into the heart of this chasm like an experienced bridge-builder, offering accessible tools to believers that invite them into the very heart of God, one relational step at a time. *First Freedoms* is so much more than a book to be consumed; it is an invitation to every believer, at any stage of their journey, to experience the relational fullness, freedom, and fruitfulness of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Rob Touchstone, director of Business as Mission at Lipscomb University and cofounder of The Well Coffeehouse

I have listened to my dear friend and ministry partner, Jennifer, teach various topics in our Freedom Prayer trainings, and often thought, *Man I wish that was written down somewhere. It's so good!* Well, now it is. And we all are the beneficiaries of her insights and applications. I highly recommend you take your time with *First Freedoms*, both alone and with others. It will be transformational.

Andy Reese, author and president of Freedom Prayer

Every page of this book is worth reading. Each one contributes to unlocking the wonderful freedom that Jesus wants us to experience. I would consider its principles to be one of the main reasons CrossBridge is such an emotionally healthy and spiritually powerful church. This book is full of hope!

Kirk Freeman, lead pastor of CrossBridge Community Church,
San Antonio, TX

Working in a crisis center, I hear an amplification of our culture's question: Where is hope for freedom from wounds and lies and sin and all the outworkings of evil that wreck our lives and the lives around us? Far from trying to find this hope in ourselves, our own insights, and our own behavior modification, *First Freedoms* offers a refreshing guide to the practices of Jesus that open us up to intimacy with God so he can bring about real freedom. The pages of this book throw open wide the door to hope and offer an attunement to hear the voice of the One who beckons us to enter.

Adam Graham, LPC and MHSP,
director of emergency psychiatric services

JENNIFER BARNETT

FIRST FREEDOMS

*Drawing Near to God by Cultivating a
Wholehearted Prayer Life*



Nashville, Tennessee



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PART 1

THE CONNECTION

In order to cultivate a wholehearted prayer life, we must be connected to God. Most of us know we should be in close relationship with him, but we never received practical steps on how to actually draw near. Yet once we take those first steps to connect to God, we can stay connected and grow in our relationship with him. In Part 1, we will explore the biblical concepts of wholeheartedly drawing near to God as Father, abiding with him, and securing our connection to him through a healthy prayer life.

COMMUNION WITH GOD

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

— Psalm 139:23–24

The language in Psalm 139:23–24 has always challenged me and simultaneously beckoned me toward more. It is poetic and beautiful, this idea of God searching and knowing a person’s heart, but it is also active and participatory. As I read it, I’m humbled to recognize that the God of the universe has a vested interest in my heart—and in removing from me what is anxious and offensive that clouds my vision. He wants to be near me. He wants my heart to be whole. Despite my blemishes, God wants to lead me in the way everlasting. There is hope for me, and God is close to me in the process.

As you begin the exercises of this study, allow me to share an important assumption of mine, and know that I share this assumption in order to help you feel secure during your pursuit of first freedoms: I assume that you, as a participant in this study, believe you were made for a relationship with God. As part of a complete relationship with him, I also assume you believe you were made to talk to him through prayer and that you believe God communicates back to us as we pray.

Simply said, I assume that you believe on some level you can truly connect with God through prayer, by which we speak to God and he speaks to us. I assume that on some level, you long for a wholehearted prayer life, where you can draw near to God and where you hide nothing before him. That God

would have access to every part of your heart, your story, and your history, and that you would trust him with all of it. That you could talk to him, and that he would respond in a way that you understand. Prayer is essentially a conversation with God, and God is not a passive participant in the conversation. So even if you have never experienced God speaking to you, I write with the assumption that you believe and hope for this kind of conversation in prayer.

If you feel that you lack personal experience with this type of communion with God or that you are a bit shaky in your faith in this regard, let me assure you that these are common barriers for those who pursue these freedoms. I find the Lord is generally quick to respond to our desperation and desire. Our spiritual résumés, even though seemingly lacking, are inconsequential to God, who sees our hearts and knows what we need. Communion with God in prayer involves hearing from God and seeing God as we wait for his response. Once we encounter his voice, it is our responsibility to respond back.

HEARING GOD

My belief that Christians can hear from God is rooted in Scripture passages about God's character and desire for relationship. While I know some people believe God no longer speaks to us, I find the argument for that belief to be based on false understandings of Scripture passages and in great contradiction to God's heart for communion with his children. When we observe the way Jesus responded to people in relationship, we gain insight into God's response to us in prayer. Healthy relationships are two-sided, and communication is vital to their health.

Prayer is a primary means of God's grace to help us encounter the Lord.

In the Garden, we find God walking and talking with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). Throughout the Scriptures, God is with his children—guiding, reproofing, and restoring them back to himself. It would be out of character for him as a living and active God to just stop what he has been doing from the beginning. The prophet Jeremiah speaks God's words: "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know"

(Jer. 33:3). God’s heart continually seeks to help us grow in communication with him as we depend on him for knowledge and revelation.

In John 10, Jesus says his sheep hear his voice, know it, and follow him. In the context of that passage, it is not only essential to their relationship for the sheep to hear the shepherd but also crucial for the sheep’s survival and protection from thieves, liars, wolves—and ultimately from the enemy. Knowing what the Lord’s voice sounds like is a non-negotiable for followers of the Good Shepherd. In 1 John 1:3, we read a similar emphasis on not just hearing God, but having fellowship with him: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” We have fellowship with God, and by definition, that fellowship is active and happens in the context of a community of people with similar interests and experiences. It would be nearly impossible to have fellowship with another Christian without communion or conversation with them. Like those relationships, our fellowship with God must be ongoing and in the process of continual growth, which requires us to hear from God. On some level, we must be familiar with the voice of God, with spiritual ears tuned to hear him in how he speaks and instructs.

*God is not
a passive
participant
in prayer.*

SEEING GOD

“Seeing God” is another way to describe our experiences with him. Scripture often uses sensory language for this. I believe God understands both our human weakness and our struggle to communicate personally, especially with someone we cannot fully see. Some argue that we cannot “see” God, using passages such as Exodus 33:20, where God says, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” But we must take into account that Greek and Hebrew words for “see” in the Bible carry some pretty broad meanings. Here are five to consider.

We can see with the physical eye (*blepōæ* in Greek), but we can also see or “behold in a vision” (*ἰδω* in Hebrew); we can “take heed” and perceive with the mind inwardly (*horaōæ* in Greek), and we can metaphorically see by knowing with the mind (*eidon* in Greek). Then we can consider, discern, or gaze upon God (*r’h* in Hebrew). So while on this side of eternity we cannot *physically* see God, we can “see” him in other ways as these other definitions reveal.

If we could not, why would the psalmist instruct us to, “Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always” (Ps. 105:4)? Or what would be the point of 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people, who are called by name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land”? Further, Paul says we see God by continually beholding the Lord’s glory as we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18).

While we cannot see God in all of his splendor with our physical eyes, he has equipped us with senses and a mind to encounter him. In fact, he wants to own and have access to those “screens” in our mind that are rightfully his, such as the places where our minds can be impressed by a thought, where we can create new ideas, and where we can recall moments from our past. This is what Paul is getting at in Ephesians 1:18: “That the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance.” God made us to see him with spiritual eyes and to encounter him in ways that run deeper and truer than what we can physically see.

SENSING GOD

Take stock for a moment of the vast amounts of useless or even life-draining thoughts that float through your “mind’s eye”—that space in your mind where you can close your eyes and picture people, places, and interactions. Get to the mental place where you can think about something in the past, such as what you ate for lunch or what you imagine this afternoon will look like in traffic driving home. Consider how all of those faculties—what we think, see, hear, smell, imagine, and feel—are bombarded daily by social media, television, technology, and entertainment. Even worse, consider how we can be bombarded by our own self-promoting and greedy imaginations!

Consider now how God wants to fill the very senses he created. As believers, we have been given “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), with the eyes of our heart made to encounter him. This is not just strictly a cognitive knowledge-based encounter, but a wholehearted one through which we can both see him and hear him with our spiritual eyes and ears. Communion is not just knowing *about him* but *knowing him fully*. If that were not so, his Word would not instruct us to wait on him, seek his face, and know his voice. Since

communion is a goal in our relationship with God, then, logically, he wants us to use our minds and senses, which he created, to help us encounter him. Scripture uses sensory words so we can know him fully—not just intellectually but on every level.

If God did not want to commune with us on a sensory level, he would not have used parables and pictures to offer truths. But he did through Jesus. A picture communicates depth and layers that words cannot, and when we read Jesus' parables, we typically can see them in our minds in ways that are personal to us. I have asked many people to "picture" Psalm 23 in prayer, and hearing people describe their variety of responses is beautiful. That psalm shows up on that screen in their mind that can create and imagine, and it is often deeply personal and specific to their life. Thus, God knows how to relay information in ways we can understand by what we see and feel. His messages are personal and often "speak our language," using those screens in our mind to communicate.

Consider another example of a sensory-level approach to experiencing God. Matthew 7:7–8 depicts God's heart for how he wants us to seek him: by knocking on a door that "will be opened." This is not a literal door but a figure of speech. This picture helps us understand who he is, even though our physical eyes don't see a literal door. Our spiritual eyes can more easily understand his promises when they're framed in terms of something relatable. I challenge anyone to read this Scripture without seeing a door in their mind's eye. You can't help but see it!

Often people even see where they are in relationship to that door or where God is or his countenance in response to our knocking. God uses that mental picture to help us fully take in this message about his desire to commune with us. And what kind of God would describe this opening door only to mislead us? He wouldn't give us an image like this to trick us or disappoint us. That would counter the very nature of God in Scripture. He wants to reveal himself, and our response to what he reveals usually demonstrates where we are in relationship with him.

Elsewhere in the Scriptures, God describes himself as a shade from heat, a refuge, and a stronghold. He is the Rock, Banner, and Shield. The metaphors and names used to describe his nature are endless, and they help us encounter him. Jesus was a carpenter by trade, but people more often think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Why? Because we find something very

inviting about this part of his personality. We can picture a shepherd, and we know that good shepherds tend to their flock and keep them safe. The picture reveals something in God's character that we long for. We can see it and understand.

The many pictures God uses in Scripture to engage our mind's eye prove that he intended for us to use our imaginations to encounter him. For at least this *First Freedoms* study, I hope you are open to the fact that God may want to use the very senses and faculties he created to usher in encounters with him in your prayer life, even if praying in this way is new to you. I know that I want nothing to be off-limits to God in my heart and mind when I go to him in prayer, and I hope you want that too. That way he can have access to the places in our minds where we create, remember, are impressed by, and have an emotional response to him in order to speak to us fully.

We must be open to this communion and allow him to communicate with full access to our hearts and minds in whichever way he pleases. We cannot have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16) if we only encounter him with just a portion of what he created. We give him permission to communicate, with access to every part and a desire for him to fill it. We find him when we give him full ownership of every place in our heart (Jer. 29:13). That's what a whole-hearted prayer life looks like.

SEEKING SAFE COMMUNION WITH GOD

When we acknowledge that the Lord wants to communicate with us as we pray, then looking at parameters in communion with God is an important next step. Even in our weaknesses, God intends for us to communicate back with him. Of course, God is trustworthy and perfect, but we are flawed and can mishear him at times. Therefore, knowing the boundaries of interacting with God is important. We can hold to these parameters as safe and biblical boundaries as we learn to encounter him more. They give guideposts and offer plenty of grace in the process of growing in prayer, and they also stand as clear markers to know what is and isn't of God.

1. *His voice aligns with his Word.* God will not say, do, or reveal anything contrary to his Word. Whatever we hear in his still small voice or sense in his presence or even see in our mind's eye—it must

line up with his Word, his character, and his nature to be verified as his voice. Scripture is the manual that depicts who God is, and for him to depart from it would run counter to his holiness. His ways are unchanging, and the Bible gives truths for us to recognize those ways. What we sense from God as we pray will match who he is in Scripture.

2. We can grow in discerning his voice. We are human, which means we are not perfect, and we are capable of misinterpretation, as I mentioned. There is a biblical precedent for discerning the voice of God in the dialogue between a young Samuel and his mentor, Eli. Samuel responded to Eli, believing that Eli had called him, when in fact God had called him (1 Sam. 3). After Samuel mistook the voice of God three times, Eli told him to respond by saying, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (v. 9). How encouraging to know we can grow in our discernment of his voice even after missing it! Samuel gave a precedent for the process (success and failure) of knowing God’s voice.

3. We must reject other voices in prayer. We, like Jesus, can encounter three voices as we pray: our voice, God’s voice, and the enemy’s voice. Consider Jesus in the wilderness as he encountered the devil twisting truths using Scripture. Or in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus stated, “Not my will, but yours” (Luke 22:42). Or the countless times he simply heard what the Father said, and then obeyed. He was aware of the conflict in what he heard and could discern the source of each voice.

Knowing these three important parameters of prayer is crucial, and they point to why I’m such a big fan of praying in groups of two or three, especially for those learning to hear God for the first time. Praying with others like this is also important for those waiting on God for help in a weighty or confusing matter. We can go forth in prayer this way with full faith that God made us to be led by the Spirit and he also made us to be open-handed—because on our own we can more easily miss God’s voice and mess it up too. There is grace as we learn and fine-tune our spiritual ears and eyes, but how helpful it is to learn with mentors and friends who encourage us along the way! The early believers set a precedent in Acts for corporately “[devoting] themselves” (2:42) to prayer, and like every other spiritual discipline, it is sometimes easier to learn with friends.

Communion with anyone involves sharing intimate thoughts and feelings, and genuine prayer is the ultimate example of communion with God. God created us to glorify him and enjoy him, and there's no better way to glorify him and enjoy him than by encountering him through prayer. We glorify him fully when we look to him to fill our need to know him and to be known by him—that we would in him alone be satisfied. Many Christians walk around feeling dismal because they do not experience this gift of delightful communion for which they were made.

We tend to approach God with our sin and our worries without spending much time waiting on him and simply enjoying him. Our personal devotion can often lack worship and space for our eyes to be fixed on Jesus for no other reason than to marvel at his glory. There is no greater joy than to know him and be known by him in prayer, when our spirit is delighted to hear his voice, sense his presence, and see with the eyes of our heart what he offers to us in our deep need to enjoy him.

When our prayer lives feel dismal and without his glory, we often abandon the storehouse available to us in communion with God. We do this out of fear or guilt, often because we believe multiple lies swirling in our heads about how God works and who we are. So we retreat, believing that the grace to grow in prayer does not apply *to us*.

But grace *does* apply to us, and we need him to teach us this truth. We are most fulfilled when we seek and find him. The challenge often, though, is we just don't know practically *how* to seek and find him. In the pages that follow, you will have an opportunity to learn how to do so in drawing near to God.

In each chapter of this book, I offer prompts to help you grow in your prayer life. These come in two sections called “Personal Prayer” and “Community Connection.” Each of these sections contains questions and prompts, which move in a specific order and help you progress through the main concepts in each chapter. Take as much time as you need with each question, and I encourage you to revisit them throughout the study as you build your capacity to pray. You can return to these on a regular basis in your own time with the Lord. The Personal Prayer section is for you to work through on your own, and the Community Connection section gives you a way to discuss the chapter within a group setting.

PERSONAL PRAYER

As you begin your first Personal Prayer section in this chapter, I recommend you work through each prompt in order and pause after each one, not only to think about each specific prayer point or action, but more importantly to ask the Lord for his response as you seek him. It is normal and very possible that you may not receive a response from him on every question, but you are building your capacity to be still and wait on him. It has been my experience that he often has much more to communicate than we give him time to. Our waiting is good, no matter the outcome. I suggest spending enough time on each number to grasp the concept and really wait on the Lord for a response before you proceed to the next one.

For most people, the Personal Prayer section each week can be completed in one sitting, but it can take multiple sittings over a few days or even a week if you need more time. Whatever amount of time you spend, I recommend you return to the questions and steps and practice multiple times so that it becomes a part of your daily prayer routine with God. The pace is up to you, but it is most important to learn these foundational practices so you can easily return to them again and again in prayer.

1. Before you begin a conversation with God today, take some intentional time to get comfortable with giving him access to your heart and mind by making sure the screens that you encounter him with are active and accessible. Resist the urge, for a moment, to be overly spiritual in this activity, and just close your eyes and picture something to drink. Record in as much detail as you can what you see, describing every part of the scene in your mind.

2. It is likely that you “saw” a very specific drink in a very specific container, possibly free-floating in the air or sitting on a known table in your home. Now read Psalm 23:1–3 and close your eyes. Picture the images of this psalm on the same screen in your mind, inviting the Lord to meet you in it. See the invitation in these verses, feel it, and listen to God. Again, when you are ready, record in as much detail as possible whatever you might have seen, felt, and heard.

3. You likely not only saw in your mind’s eye the visuals of Psalm 23 but had an emotional response to it as well. Similar to remembering a treasured birthday party that you loved, you not only saw the image but sensed it and had a response to it emotionally too.

Now close your eyes again in a posture of prayer and ask the Lord if he will allow you to recall a recent situation in your life where you needed to let him restore your soul but you did not go to him. Take stock of how that situation made you feel by simply applying his truth to it using Psalm 23:1–3. Ask the Lord to show you or give you a sense of what it would look like to allow him access to this situation in a place of “leading you beside still waters” and “restoring your soul.”

Give yourself some time to see it, feel it, and sense it, listening and waiting for whatever he wants to reveal. Record any details that you

sense as you wait on him, knowing that it's okay not to receive great detail—there is peace in the simple and obedient act of waiting on him. We will learn in the weeks to come practical tools to help you see and hear him more.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

As you begin the Community Connection section here and in each chapter, the goal is to connect with both God and the others in your group. While some discussion is necessary, prioritize time to pray for one another in each meeting. Select a group leader or facilitator if one is not already in place.

In some group meetings, it may be helpful to wait on the Lord in a place of intercession as the group facilitator or leader responds to one or two people to help them inquire of the Lord for further wisdom or places of freedom. You are never a bystander, but part of an intercessory community. If the leader is helping a group member navigate through something in the prompts, begin to silently pray as they assist them. The group leader can also pray out loud if a question requires the group to inquire of the Lord. The other group members can listen quietly, and then share as directed by the leader.

There is freedom for the group to navigate this section based on the group needs or specific areas of interest or inquiry. Ideally in each meeting everyone will participate by sharing, praying, interceding, or exhorting. Each participant should resist the urge to give advice but instead focus on praying and asking the Lord to bring wisdom and counsel. If possible, allow time for every group member to participate at least once in answering a question or praying. Your group's connection with God will only bring greater connection with one another.

1. Begin by sharing with your group your personal responses to seeing as you read Psalm 23 in the Personal Prayer section. Take notice of how the same passage of Scripture can play out on the screen of the mind so differently from person to person, yet still remain so unwaveringly true. How did God show his personal understanding of each person in what he revealed?
2. Knowing that relationship with God is both intimate and personal, and that he has access to our faculties that he created for communion, discuss the pitfalls of quickly reading Scripture without inviting the Lord to meet you as you read his Word. When our time in Scripture is purely cognitive, which easily happens in fast reading, we do not allow him to access the other places that he created in us. What do we miss? How does this affect our concept of prayer?
3. As a group, define what the three voices mentioned in this chapter sound like: the voice of God, the voice of the enemy, and your own will. How do you determine which one is speaking, so you can know how to respond to it?
4. Conclude your group time by praying for one another in the area of growing in greater ability to see and hear God. Pray for specific requests or concerns for each member, such as, “I’m not able to hear him,” or, “My imagination is so active. I’m scared to give him access to that part of my mind.” Declare as a group your desire that he grow you in your ability to encounter him.

It is freeing and a bit daunting to really ask God to open the eyes of your heart and your spiritual ears to know him more. You can declare that you were made to commune with him, and that you desire to know him fully. Nothing is off-limits when it comes to allowing God to search your heart. You can trust God to meet you in your hunger to know him in greater measure, just as he intended.