



SARAH ARTHUR

THE  
ONE  
YEAR<sup>®</sup>  
DAILY  
GRIND

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*The One Year Daily Grind*

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◦ **To Isaiah House of Hospitality:** ◦  
“Salvation will surround you like city walls,  
and praise will be on the lips of all who enter there.”  
Isaiah 60:18 ◦



# WELCOME TO THE DAILY GRIND

Welcome to this collection of daily ramblings on the spiritual life. I say “ramblings” because the thoughts in this book are not your usual devotional material. You may wonder why they’re so chatty and personal, or why they wander aimlessly at times, or why they often end with a question rather than a neat, tidy thought that ties everything together. You’ll notice they aren’t always cheerful or inspiring; sometimes they have an ironic edge. That’s because, in my own spiritual journey, I’ve come to realize that the Christian faith isn’t always neat and tidy. Nor is it always cheerful and inspiring. It’s not easy to get up in the morning and fix my eyes on Jesus through prayer or devotional reading. The spiritual journey takes work. It’s a daily grind.

But it isn’t a grind in the same way that other daily rituals are, like getting stuck in traffic on the way to campus or work or whatever we do to survive during the week. It isn’t a grind like taking medicine. Technically speaking, I can survive without the spiritual life, and of course millions of people do (though their souls are shrinking every day). In that sense, the spiritual life is more like my first cup of coffee for the day—another kind of daily “grind,” if you will. I don’t need it to survive, but if I go without it, I’m muddled and grumpy and unproductive. Something in my soul needs that shot of spiritual caffeine every day.

If you have a personal relationship with coffee, you get the metaphor. If not, it’s going to be a long year for both of us. But bear with me: I have a feeling God is up to something with these daily writings (for me) and readings (for you), and I’m willing to stick it out if you are. Somehow I think it’ll be worth it.

Commitments are like that. Have you noticed?

**Sarah**

**To Do**

I woke up this morning in a panic about all the things I have to do. This is not a new experience. It happens roughly 357 days a year. The times it doesn't are when I'm on vacation hiking in the wilderness, when the only things on my to-do list are:

1. Wake up.
2. Eat.
3. Walk in one direction for a really long time.
4. Stop. Set up camp.
5. Eat again.
6. Go to sleep.
7. Repeat steps 1–6.

I'm not on a hike right now, which means my list of things to do is ridiculously huge. At the top is the line item, "Write one devotion for *Daily Grind*," so when I get to the bottom of this page, I can check off my first item. Do you know how tempting it is to simply blather on about nothing in particular, periodically checking my watch, my word count, my location on this blank white space, until I'm done?

Maybe you've never had to write one devotion a day for an entire year, but you know what I'm talking about. Work and school, errands and exercise are like this. We go through the motions and then mentally check them off. Church is like this too. And small groups. And daily devotions, whatever we think those are. Let's be honest: We often treat faith like another thing on our to-do list—albeit somewhere toward the bottom so we don't feel all that guilty if we don't get to it. But then we come across a quote like this:

I used to write in my daily calendar 7–7:30 a.m.—Prayer. But many times I passed that up. It was one more thing to pass by that day. Now I write 7–7:30 a.m.—God. Somehow that's a little harder to neglect.<sup>1</sup>

So it's not devotions that we're putting on our to-do list, it's a Person, and what would any person think if we failed to show up for a prearranged get-together? God isn't just one more thing "to do." Rather, he's the air we breathe, our daily bread, the Spirit that gives us eternal life beyond the frenzied activity of this world.

What if God's not on *our* to-do list . . . but we're on *his*?



## The Real Calendar

My calendar is crammed full of stuff, and not just the stuff I put in there, either. The one I bought for this new year had things written on the pages already: national holidays and celebrations and observances—in short, more things for me to *do*. Grr. And thanks to businesses like Hallmark, which continually remind us of all the obscure holidays out there (such as Sweetest Day, whatever that means), mandatory shopping is also on the schedule.

The truth is, my calendar isn't really *mine*. A lot of things are already planned for me as a member of this culture, and I'm just along for the ride.

But there's another calendar out there, one that once governed Western society. It includes holidays and celebrations and observances too, except the focus is on Jesus. Starting with the prophecies about Christ's birth (Advent), the calendar works its way through the various events of his life, death, and resurrection, culminating with the season of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit swept through the disciples and sent them into the world as the first Christian evangelists (see Acts 2).

Advent to Pentecost. That's what we call the church calendar. It was created over a thousand years ago as a way for communities to retell and remember the greatest story ever told.

Most people are unaware of the church calendar these days, except when some yahoo makes a stupid movie like *40 Days and 40 Nights*, about a guy who tries to give up premarital sex for Lent.<sup>//</sup> Our culture also still celebrates things like Christmas and Easter—even All Saints' Day, though most people don't know that's where the word *Halloween* comes from (see November 1). Every once in a while, the civic calendar and the church calendar collide in a bizarre train wreck of values and beliefs, and I'm left realizing I'd better stick with the church calendar if my schedule is going to have any real spiritual significance.

So I suppose it's no surprise that this devotional book is organized around the church calendar more than anything else. But have no fear: I won't therefore ignore such vitally important events as, say, International Talk Like a Pirate Day(!?).

Acts 2:41-47



// In case you're wondering, Lent is the season of personal repentance leading up to Easter. Which begs the question: Does giving up premarital sex for only forty days and nights fix the *real* problem? ("NEXT, on Dr. Phil . . .")

## The Spiritual Life

Okay, so I should probably try to define “the spiritual life” before we get too far, since that’s what this book is about.

I’ll start by telling a story. One time I was sitting in a coffeehouse reading a book of daily prayer. The book was small, dark blue, and completely plain except for a tiny cross on the front cover. It must have been the cross that caught the attention of the person sitting at the table next to me, because she leaned over and said in all seriousness, “Hi. I’m curious: Are you a very spiritual person?”

How would you answer that question?

On one level, I believe every human being is a spiritual person in the sense that each person has a spirit. It’s the part of our beings that has no material substance but that constitutes life. The word for spirit in Hebrew (the ancient language of the Old Testament of the Bible) is *ruwach*, which is sometimes translated as “breath” or “wind.” So when we read in the first chapter of Genesis that the *Spirit* of God hovered over the unformed earth, it’s the same word that we see in places like Job 12:10, where “the *breath* of every human being” comes from God (*italics added*). Take that spirit or breath away, and the human being dies. So in a sense, we’re all spiritual people, whether we’re conscious of it or not.

But there’s also Spirit as in *Holy Spirit*: the power and presence of God that dwells in us when we claim the eternal life God offers through Jesus Christ. It’s like connecting a cell phone to a charger and plugging it into an electrical outlet because the battery will die sooner or later. Like a battery, the human spirit doesn’t have the power to last for eternity separated from the true source of its life: the Holy Spirit. The Bible promises that those who claim Jesus as Lord are plugged into the only power source that will outlive and outlast this world (see John 3:16, which you maybe know by heart anyway). This means that as we continually seek to put Jesus in charge of every aspect of our lives, we are *very* spiritual people: intentionally, consciously, eternally. That’s the spiritual life.

And yet none of this matters if I don’t know what the woman meant by “spiritual.” How come she didn’t ask if I was very “religious,” for example? or “faithful”? What does popular culture mean by that word?

More on that later. At the moment, the unspiritual part of me is begging for caffeine.

Genesis 1:1-2; Job 12:7-10



JANUARY 4

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## The Best Stuff

It took me a couple of months, but I think I've found the best coffee on campus. (Side note: Hubby Tom is a grad student in seminary at Duke University, so we live in a dinky apartment one block from school.)

At first I went to this really cool place around the corner that has wireless Internet and funky artwork and a girl named Courtney, who began to recognize me after about a week of watching me shuffle in every day, another sad junkie on the hunt for a lift. But eventually I realized I don't like dark roast, which is all they serve besides decaf.

So then I went to this other café, where I meet with my friend Enuma every week to talk about writing. It feels very scholarly to sip our Starbucks and gaze at the glass architecture of the Biological Genetics building or whatever it's called and discuss things like editing. But I must say, the coffee isn't nearly as inspiring as the conversation.

Next I tried the cafeteria in the center of the campus, the one that looks like the main hall of Hogwarts in Harry Potter. I half expected to be greeted by the Sorting Hat at the checkout and sent to the Slytherin section of the room with my muffin and coffee. But instead I was greeted by a very chipper, very deaf cashier who seemed unperturbed when I handed her the wrong change.

Me [mumbling]: Oh, sorry about that. I'm not awake yet.

Cashier [kindly, in a loud voice]: Now, don't you get down on yourself like that, ma'am. Don't you go saying that kind of thing, calling yourself retarded. You're not retarded.

[Entire cafeteria stares.]

Me [mortified]: No, you're right. Absolutely. Thanks. [Grab coffee and make quick exit.]

I don't go there anymore. Besides, the coffee was terrible. It's always lousy in a Styrofoam cup.

Finally, I found the best stuff. It's at the organic café near the chapel where we go for morning prayer during the semester. I'm not sure if the organic-ness has anything to do with it, but they serve the coffee in a china cup and then leave me alone to read and write while the place fills and empties between classes. The café is closed during Christmas break, and I'm beginning to miss it.

Unlike my search for the best coffee, I haven't been very diligent about finding the most helpful routine for spending time with God every day. When a certain devotional book or prayer service or Bible study doesn't work out, I tend to give up on the whole idea. What if I were to search just as earnestly for a devotional routine that works as I have for the best coffee on campus?

John 6:22-27





## Addicted

My kind relatives gave me a coffeemaker for Christmas, which is in one sense like giving a heroin addict a syringe and in another like giving a Christian a devotional book and saying, "Here, I know you're gonna need this." (Hold on, cowboys: I don't use metaphors lightly.) My family knows I'm addicted to caffeine, which is clear when I go without it for even one morning. I feel foggy and crabby and get a headache by midafternoon. If I'm traveling someplace where coffee isn't on hand for breakfast, it's something of a crisis until I find a drive-through Starbucks or whatever—and then of course there's always a long line of irritated junkies just like me. Sad, really.

The funny thing about it is I hated coffee for a long time and couldn't understand why people drank the stuff. It's the kind of thing you have to develop a taste for. It doesn't come naturally, but then when it's finally part of your routine, you'll move mountains to get your hands on it.

Kind of like the spiritual life, when you think about it. We know it's important to spend time every day reading the Bible and praying, but it's not the kind of thing that comes easily to us at first. We have to develop a taste for it. But once we get in the habit of it, life feels out of sorts if we go without it for any length of time. We can't think straight. We feel crabby and start growling at the people we love. Then when it finally occurs to us what the problem is, we wonder, *How could such a tiny ritual be so important?* And yet it is. We're not really content again until we've spent some time each day nurturing our spirits with the revitalizing presence of God.

What would happen if I got as addicted to God as I am to coffee? How can I move heaven and earth to carve out time for him every day?



## The Really Spiritual People

When the woman asked me if I was a very spiritual person” (see January 3), I suppose compared to most people in the coffeehouse, I appeared more overtly spiritual than the average customer. But that wouldn't be a fair judgment of our hearts, which only God can see. Is the quasi-Buddhist with the nose rings any less “spiritual” because she follows a religion of empty promises? Or rather, does her earnest search for balance, peace, and enlightenment put my own sloppy routine to shame? And what if no one has ever introduced her to the real Jesus? What if someone did?

Today is Epiphany, the day in the church calendar when we remember the journey of the wise men who followed the star from an Eastern country to baby Jesus. Matthew is the disciple who writes about what happened (see Matthew 2), and when we read his story closely, we realize that the travelers most likely didn't arrive on the night Jesus was born, as most of our crèches depict. They probably arrived weeks or months or even up to two years after Jesus' birth. So that's in part why Epiphany comes twelve days after Christmas: to signify the passing of time.

We often forget that the wise men were not “Christians” when their search began; they were probably of an Eastern religion and would have been considered pagans by our standards. But did that make them any less spiritual than the Scripture-reading believers of the day? Any less than the folks who, for example, pointed out the prophecies of Bethlehem as the Messiah's birthplace (see Matthew 2:3-6) but didn't bother to go see for themselves? If anything, the wise men's earnest search for enlightenment—for an *epiphany*—for the true Lord to worship, makes them some of the most profoundly spiritual people in the Bible. They didn't give up the search until they were kneeling at the feet of Jesus.

Could I say that about myself? Could you?

Isaiah 49:5-7



## Down the Road

I talk a lot about the “spiritual journey,” and that’s because the Christian faith isn’t merely a onetime statement of the truth so we can go to heaven when we die. It’s an intentional decision to *follow* Jesus every day for the rest of our lives, which implies fixing our eyes on him as our trail leader and putting one foot in front of the other just to keep up. He expects us to move from point A (spiritual baby) to point B (spiritual grown-up) over the long haul, and that’s why we do daily devotions like this.

One of the ways we stick to the journey is by learning from the folks who’ve taken this trail ahead of us. When I consider the many deeply devoted Christians I’ve met or read about in my life, I’m always painfully aware of how small my faith is, how much farther I have yet to go down the path to maturity. Am I a “very spiritual person” compared to any of them? No. But they’re willing to share their experiences with those of us who are a ways behind, and that’s a great comfort.

Besides the people I’ve known personally (some of whom you’ll read about this year, no doubt), the spiritual heroes who’ve most influenced me have been, among other things, writers (go figure!). People like Oswald Chambers, author of *My Utmost for His Highest*, and C. S. Lewis, author of *Mere Christianity* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The little blue book I was reading that day in the coffeehouse (see January 3) is entitled *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* and includes excerpts from authors throughout the centuries: folks like George MacDonald, Evelyn Underhill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Richard Foster, and so on. Lately I’ve also been reading my contemporaries like Lauren Winner, particularly her book *Mudhouse Sabbath*.

So don’t be surprised if I talk a lot about these folks this year. If you’ve never heard of them, I’ll introduce you.// Even as I write devotions for other people, these are the devotional readings that keep me focused in my own journey. They remind me that I’m not alone, that the Christian faith is larger than my narrow little view of it, that there are bends around the path I haven’t yet seen. Hopefully their thoughts will be an encouragement to you as well, pushing you a bit farther down the road.

In the meantime, consider: Who in your life keeps you focused on your Christian journey? Who helps you put one foot in front of the other?

Hebrews 12:1-2



## Spirituality or Whatever

Our postmodern culture isn't that big on religion, I've noticed, but likes to talk about "spirituality," a loosely defined term that, at best, admits there's more to our human experience than just our bodies, minds, and emotions—and at worst, seems to be nothing more than a selfish attempt to gain more control over our lives.

- For a lot of people spirituality has to do with things like meditation, organic foods, prayer beads, yoga, and deep breathing, the purpose of which is apparently to achieve balance and peace, not necessarily to commune with a higher power. Call it Eastern meditation, call it New Age religion, call it whatever you like—but I think this is what the woman at the coffeehouse wanted to know when she asked if I was a "very spiritual person" (see January 3). Was I aware there's more to life than eating, drinking, sleeping, thinking, making friends, and running around from place to place? Was I seeking balance and peace by reading a little book with a cross on it in the middle of a busy coffeehouse?

The bald answer to those questions is yes. Yes, I'm aware there's more to me than my body, brain, and heart. There's a dimension of me that participates in another realm altogether, an invisible plane of existence that's eternal and unchanging. It's from this realm that I get the true Power, the Spirit, the Life that gives purpose to my everyday experiences. That's what gives me balance and peace. But this Life isn't just a series of spiritual exercises meant to make me feel better about myself. It's a Person. And his name is Jesus.

But how do you explain this to a stranger?

John 4:19-26



## Small Ideas

Classes start back up this week, which is a good thing because Tom and I are driving each other nuts. Christmas break does that to roommates stuck together in tight quarters for weeks at a time—and our grad school apartment must set some kind of record for smallest number of square feet per capita. But then again, having my husband around day after day is a good reminder that the world does *not* revolve around me. When I'm alone with my laptop and MP3 player all the time, it's frighteningly easy to start thinking that I really am the center of the universe, that this spiritual life really is about *my* ideas and *my* personal maturity and the development of *my* character.

Then I pick up a book like Evelyn Underhill's *The Spiritual Life*, and I'm mortified by my own silliness. She writes:

Any spiritual view which focuses attention on ourselves, and puts the human creature with its small ideas and adventures in the centre foreground, is dangerous till we recognise its absurdity.<sup>2</sup>

And:

Our own feelings and preferences are very poor guides when it comes to the robust realities and stern demands of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Ouch. So this week I'm back to the daily routine that saves me from descending into self-centered absurdity. I get up early enough to walk into campus with Tom for morning prayer in the chapel. We sit in the wintry light with a handful of students and follow the beautiful daily ritual from *The Book of Common Prayer*, reading aloud from the Psalms, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, and repeating ancient prayers that have been said by God's people for hundreds of years. In hearing those ancient words and listening to the voices of our fellow students, my focus gradually shifts away from my own "small ideas and adventures" and onto the bigger, higher, holier life that is God's Kingdom at work in the world. He's been at it since long before I took my first breath and will continue long after I'm gone, just as he worked through the people who wrote those words in the prayer book so many centuries ago.

Which means that my own small ideas on this page aren't really mine at all, and the spiritual life is most definitely not about me. Hurrah!



## Pessimism and Wobble

Sometimes I get so familiar with the words of the Bible that they lose their meaning in my brain. How many times have I read Jesus' statements about worry—for example, when he asks, "Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?" (Matthew 6:27)? I've read that passage dozens, if not hundreds, of times. And what about when Paul says, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything" (Philippians 4:6)? I just typed that sentence mostly by heart; that's how often I've read it and quoted it. But it doesn't seem to matter how much I memorize the words if my actions don't reflect the truth of them in my life.

That's why sometimes I need to have those old biblical truths reinforced through the words of Christians who have been walking this journey for a long time. I said last week that a lot of my spiritual mentors are writers (see January 7), and I think part of the reason for that is because they know how to say old truths in new ways that my ears are open to hearing. They startle me into a fresh awareness of what my heart once knew.

When I wake up every morning in a panic about all the stuff I have to get done before the end of the day, I rehearse the words of Jesus and Paul about worry and anxiety—and those biblical reminders are lifelines. But I also turn to the words of my fellow journeyers and mentors like Evelyn Underhill, who has a knack for grabbing me by the shoulders (metaphorically speaking) and shaking me awake again.

"Fuss and feverishness," she writes, "anxiety, intensity, intolerance, instability, pessimism and wobble, and every kind of hurry and worry—these, even on the highest levels, are signs of the self-made and self-acting soul. . . . The saints are never like that. They share the quiet and noble qualities of the great family to which they belong."<sup>4</sup>

Worry I've heard about too many times. *Anxiety* I know by heart. But "pessimism and wobble"? That's like a smack upside the head. Suddenly I'm alive to Jesus' words again. Now I'm listening.

Matthew 7:24-27





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53. Lewis’s stepson, Douglas Gresham, highlights these details in his biography *Jack’s Life: The Life Story of C. S. Lewis* (B&H Publishing Group, 2005).
54. Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 148.
55. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, quoted in Martindale and Root, *The Quotable Lewis*, 46.



## MORE SPIRITUAL CAFFEINE

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