

In Constant Prayer

reviewed by [John D. Blase](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

In Review



In Constant Prayer

Robert Benson
Thomas Nelson

One day when he was nearly 40 years old, Robert Benson stumbled onto the prayer cycle known as the daily office, and since then his life has never been the same. The

daily office, he has written, is “the one true thing that has come to matter to me the most.”

His latest book, *In Constant Prayer*, is the second in Thomas Nelson’s Ancient Practices series, edited by Phyllis Tickle. The first installment of the series is an overview written by Brian McLaren; subsequent titles include *Sabbath*, *Fasting* and *The Liturgical Year*.

What Benson hopes to do in this volume is “open up some of the mystery of the daily office for those who have had little or no exposure to this ancient way of Christian prayer.” The book is a welcome primer for those who are drawn to the daily office but have no one to guide them. Benson leads readers to the green pastures and still waters of the office, but he will not feed them by hand. He will suggest but never demand. He trusts his audience.

As an author and retreat leader, Benson focuses on how to live a more contemplative life. Titles such as *Living Prayer* and *Between the Dreaming and the Coming True* have gathered a loyal following of readers who appreciate his humanity coupled with an introvert’s attentiveness. Benson is neither a theologian nor a scholar. He is a writer, and so his book is full of stories.

If you come to this book looking for something other than stories, you will be disappointed. But if you believe, as Emily Dickinson told us, that the truth must be told in slanted ways, Benson’s approach may just whet your appetite for something that for too many years most Protestants haven’t even known was on the menu. Along the way Benson tells a lot about himself. Some readers may wince at so many first-person pronouns, but Benson’s voice is one his readers have grown to trust and in which they have found great worth.

Benson claims that the daily office was intended for all the faithful, not just professionals. In a brief dash through history, he maintains that when the church crossed to the New World, it lost the office, and the prayers weren’t even expected of the clergy anymore. As for the present-day church, we may have Web sites and better buildings than the ancients, but “we do not say our prayers.” Benson invites us to laugh at ourselves when we fail to measure up, while continuing to strive for a life well prayed.

Two chapters hold particularly meaningful gifts. The first gift is Benson’s insistence that the excuse “nobody told me” is no longer valid. After reading Benson’s words,

we have no reason not to pray. If the church is to have an impact of any kind in the days ahead, it will be because you and I stepped into the line of corporate prayer that has been going on for some 6,000 years. “People of prayer say their prayers—every day.”

The other gift Benson unwraps is something we already know but need to be reminded of. In times when words fail us, the prayers of those who have gone before us can be like water in a dry and thirsty land. When we cannot find the words we need, those of the daily office can give voice to the groaning of our hearts.

“Thanks be to God” is the blessing that traditionally brings the daily office to a close. Such was the feeling I had on closing Benson’s latest gem.