

“*The Finishing School* is a must-read. It’s not just a book, it’s a meaningful conversation with a friend who loves God and wants to give you the very best practical and spiritual insight on so many important aspects of life. I can’t think of a better combination! Val’s writing is sincere, candid, and I felt like she was sitting with me over coffee the whole time, cheering me on! From finance to friendship, *The Finishing School* is packed with wisdom from the Word, practical advice, actionable steps, and a whole lot of humor along the way. I’m grabbing a copy (or four) for my own kids to read one day, and for my dearest friends. I can’t recommend this unique book enough!”

LARA CASEY,

Author of Make It Happen: Surrender Your Fear, Take the Leap, Live on Purpose. LaraCasey.com.

“In a culture where constant connection and chaotic schedules is praised, *The Finishing School* brings women back to the core of what life is about—faithfully walking with God and chasing after His dreams. Val’s simplicity and passion will ignite a passion in your heart to be content with less, live to the fullest, and enjoy the freedom God has given us. Each chapter intentionally walks you through practical steps to living a life of purpose and joy in the midst of our busy days. Val’s vulnerability from her own life experiences and wisdom bubbles over from her writing into the reader’s life. One thing is sure, God is not finished with us yet, and He will use *The Finishing School* to encourage you to make the most of your days!”

GRETCHEN SAFFLES,

*Creator of Life Lived Beautifully, Author of A God-Sized Love Story.
www.lifelivedbeautifully.com*

“A few page turns into *The Finishing School* and I knew I’d found a kindred spirit in Valerie Woerner. Valerie’s passion for the refinement of our souls gently coaches us along as she provides a framework to think, process and pray through areas of our lives that could benefit from some finishing. I know you’ll be appropriately challenged while graciously given space for God’s refining work in your life.”

JENNI CATRON,

Church leader and author of CLOUT: Discover and Unleash Your God-Given Influence

“If you’ve ever been overwhelmed by the sheer pressure of life, and struggled with figuring out how to do things ‘right’, or in a way that ensures God received the glory, *The Finishing School* is your resource. I’ll be coming back to this book again and again for guidance when life starts to feel off-balance or out of whack!”

WHITNEY ENGLISH,

Small business consultant and found of Day Designer ®

“I love how Val covers so many topics that we as Christians would like to grow in. It’s opened my eyes to areas in my life that I wasn’t even aware of that needed more effort and, in other areas, it built confidence to continue. Although so many topics are presented, it is a perfect balance of depth without being overwhelming. The practical tips and extra tools make it simple to remember and implement. It’s grown in me a beautiful picture of what a life well learned can look like and gotten me excited to put everything into practice.”

NATALIE METREJEAN,

Creator of the Wholeheartedly devotional. NatalieMetrejean.com

“Reading *The Finishing School* felt as though I was sitting in Val’s screened-in porch and we were having a cup of coffee just sharing our hearts: feeling both challenged and encouraged by the word of God and a trusted friend. The truth is, this book is timeless and for that it will forever stay on my bookshelf as a resource for life.”

MAE SNODGRASS,

Wife, private tutor, woman aiming to soak in God’s daily grace

“One of my favorite things about Valerie and the products she makes is that NOTHING is theoretical. *The Finishing School* is no exception. It doesn’t just give you ideas, it puts flesh and wisdom on real questions and the workbook provides real steps to take action on what you’ve learned. What an amazing and valuable tool for the women of our generation!”

JESS CONNOLLY,

*Owner of Naptime Diaries Shop, cofounder of The Influence Network,
coauthor of upcoming book Wild and Free*

“With the world demanding our time and schedules more than ever — the true reward is when we surrender our control to let Him filter through our hearts, habits, and schedules. That is where we find joy. *The Finishing School* shows us what that looks like and how to apply it in our own lives. We fill our calendars and perpetrate the glorification of being busy — perhaps the most important lesson of all is we become better women, servants and children of God when we take time to rest and surrender ourselves in Him.”

STEPHANIE STERJOVSKI,

Creative Director: SS Print Shop, Content Creator: SS Life & Style Blog

“*The Finishing School* is a beautiful balance of God’s truth and transparency. Val’s words do not just inspire, but offer a genuine guide to fill in life’s gaps with more of God’s best so He gets the glory. Grab a cup of coffee and a highlighter. You’re about to make a new friend.”

MICHELLE MYERS,

*Business mentor and founder of She Works His Way and
Cross Training Couture*

“*The Finishing School* could not have come at a better time. Valerie has a gentle, affirming yet challenging way to move you from someday to today. You do not feel judged, you just feel like your girlfriend is saying ‘I totally get it. I’ve been there....in fact, I AM there and I know God wants more for us, so let’s do this together.’ I see a fresh wave of accountability and spurring one another on in the spiritual and life disciplines the Lord is calling us to.”

JENN SPRINKLE,

*Designer and creative strategist, co-author of 31 days of Prayer for the
Dreamer and the Doer, Co-founder of The Well Studio. thewellstudio.co.*

“*The Finishing School* was refreshing to my heart, challenging to my pursuit of godliness, and encouraging to my soul. It is a valuable resource at every stage of spiritual life and with Val’s easy-to-read writing style it is one that is definitely hard to put down!”

ASHLEY DELAUNE,

Wife, local entrepreneur, girl after a holy heart

“*The Finishing School* is overflowing with practical tips and nuggets of goodness. Valerie’s easy, conversational style of writing, combined with her wise, gentle nudges, do one thing: point you to Christ. She’s the one-in-a-million big sister you never knew you were missing.”

LORIEN OWENS,

Wife and mother of 3, avid reader and adventurer, former delivery girl

“*The Finishing School* is refining and refreshing! Val graciously welcomes readers into her life and home. As she shares practical truths, we are given the opportunity to take part and reflect on areas in our own lives that need a little work and a lot of Jesus! *The Finishing School* invites us not just to read and take in new knowledge, but actively live out the what we’ve learned.”

KATE POWELL,

Photographer & owner of kate&co.



THE FINISHING SCHOOL

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The Finishing School, by Valerie Woerner

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the
FINISHING
SCHOOL

how one book nerd began living what she learned

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To my daughter, Vivi Mae.
I can't wait to see the fair lady you become.



Open Your Books to Page...

A G U I D E T O O R I E N T A T I O N

Finishing schools of yesteryear taught about things like posture and etiquette. I'm not here to teach you about that. If I were, I can only imagine the massive book-burning riots that it would ignite. I sit cross-legged on chairs at restaurants. I slouch. I make inappropriate comments at inappropriate times, not on purpose, of course. All the Audrey Hepburn movies in the world haven't changed me, because real change is hard. I may not be passionate enough to change my social graces, or lack thereof, but I am so passionate about the refinement of our soul.

I think we all desire a refined life—the life that testifies to a God who is daily at work in you and me. We want to see fruit that comes from hard work, hardships, and a heart that is being changed by God. We want to taste the victories of seeing God smooth out our rough spots. We will never find perfection this side of heaven, but that doesn't mean God isn't continually shaping us in our pursuit for holiness.

Perhaps my nerdiest quality is my thirst for knowledge. If you tried to strap a book sack to my back and hand me a Scantron and No. 2 pencil, I'd go kicking and screaming. BUT I do get all googly-eyed when I see a new book I want to read and call

journaling my thoughts as I learn new things the perfect Friday night. Remember the wise words you learned from Francis Bacon in your school days? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Of course you don't, so I'll tell you.

He said "knowledge is power." I couldn't agree more. But one thing I've learned after years of self-help books, business webinars, and conferences is, I *knew* what to do. I just wasn't doing it.

The truth is, we can't stay students forever. We have to put those lessons to the test and embrace the life that awaits us. That's why I like the idea of finishing school. You didn't learn manners for kicks and giggles or to simply be smarter. You learned it to use as you entered society. Finishing school served no purpose if those fair ladies decided to hunker down and make homeroom their forever home. But if you have ever felt like I have, that space of learning is safe. Keeping my nose in a book is terribly comfortable and doesn't really require anything but to consume. The problem is, it's boring and fruitless if we never take the opportunity to exercise what we have learned. James 1:22 says,

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

When we step out with the decided notion that we are being transformed and going to play an active, but submissive role in God's plan, we're blessed. And we blossom. We blossom like an awkward preteen turning into a beautiful, refined young woman.

So where are you today? Do you want to live an intentional life? Do you want to experience all the fruit that God has for you here on earth? I know I do. It's not to pay the down payment on our mansion in heaven. Obedience to God and making an effort to live life more intentionally is not about earning salvation. It's a gift. And that gift should spur us on to live a life that glorifies God.

Our lives should be radically different because of Christ who lives in us. Too often they don't look different. And that's not God's fault. It's our laziness. If we say we are changed but look exactly the same as we always have, why would anyone bother with this whole God thing? The radical transformation that will happen when we get to heaven is exciting to me, but what's also exciting to me is that even in an imperfect world, God is working in me every day to look more like Him right here on earth. We are so privileged that God is a god who not only cares about our eternity but about our life here on earth too.

I am so fired up by this truth. Apart from God, we are a gigantic mess. And with God, we're still a gigantic mess, but one that is loved and being refined because of Christ who lives in us. Christ makes us something new. Any change we make is a direct response from the Lord's work in our lives, and part of His work is putting our very being in motion. God has called us to be His hands and feet. If God wanted to drop food on a homeless man's stoop, He most certainly could. If He wanted you to forgive someone, He could slip a little forgive and forget pill in your water and be done with it. But He instead decides to use us and allow us to be a part of His plan. He desires followers who desire Him, not robots who mindlessly make His plan happen. And lucky for us kids who can't seem to get our hands out of the cookie jar, part of His plan is to grow you and me. To transform us from the inside out and take us from a rebellious toddler to reflections of Him.

We are about to spend a whole book talking about transfor-

mation in our lives and how to make progress and become refined by the Lord in our daily lives. My good girl heart has to check my motives when I start getting enthusiastic about DOING. It's all well and good until I leave God out of it. Then it's not so well and good. Writing this book, I had to ask, Am I encouraging others to keep spinning their wheels and focusing on the checklists of a good Christian life?

I really wrestled with this. I didn't want to share a tool that would actually distract from God. Even good things like learning habits or creating some structure can do that. This led me to my Bible to find out how God reconciled faith and works.

A passage that I have clung to for years came to mind: John 15:1-11.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have

kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

The fruit excites me. The fruit reminds me that God is working in me. It is a testament to His faithfulness and daily presence in my life. The fruit is an outflow of a deep, abiding relationship with the Lord. And my hope is that each chapter will be part of the pruning process that God uses in your life so that you may bear more fruit. Do not leave Him out of this process. That is the key to making sure this doesn't turn into more spinning your wheels.

Fellow Christians, this book is not just about you or me. Our world is hurting, and it's hating Christians because of the behavior they see from so many of us. It's hypocritical, it lacks love, and it's double-minded. When we say one thing and our lives don't reflect that, we aren't serving God's kingdom well. My hope is that you will be encouraged in these pages to live out your faith and that people would see your fruit. This doesn't mean seeking after perfection. It simply means that we look different than we did last year because of God's work in our lives. I think when unbelievers can see our walk—trips and falls and all—that speaks to them too. Let's be genuine and authentic as we pursue Christ and point to His glory.

This book is one part touchy-feely and personal and two parts practical, which is pretty much just like me. Each chapter will have stories from my journey of refinement and what God taught me along the way, as well as practical tips to apply to your own life. There will be a resource page at the end of each chapter with additional resources for further study and links to the worksheets that

will help you work through what we talk about. You can print it out at valmariepaper.com/homework (password: fairlady) or if you don't feel like printing, check out our shop (shop.valmariepaper.com) for our Lessons from *The Finishing School* Workbook. I would also recommend keeping a Bible handy and dig into it as the Spirit leads you. You can work through each topic however you like, but here are two suggestions:

1. You can read this book over a year and take steps in each area. There are twenty-four chapters, which works out to reading a chapter, processing the information and working through the homework for one week, and then applying the information and practicing it in your everyday life the following week. This plan allows for six weeks of a break through the year.

2. You can read through the book entirely and ask the Lord to reveal any areas in particular that He wants to park on for a little while longer. Some chapters may be no-brainers for you, while others may step on your toes a bit.

Whatever way makes most sense to you, go for it. I don't want this to be a book that sits on your shelf collecting dust or is read at a surface level. I will be working through this book right along with you. My soul yearns for moments of victory that show the fruit, and my soul even longs for those moments of failure that test and refine me. Fair lady, here's your chance to make a change. I'm rooting you on and am hosting a pep rally in your honor.

Father, I pray for this person reading these words right now, that your truth would shine through on these pages. That my words would fall into the background of the bigger story and plan that you have for them as they read this book. Bless their open heart, as they have chosen to pick this book up to learn more about you

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and your plan for their life here on earth. In Jesus's name, amen!

Can I just say a quick thank you before we dive in? I am so grateful for the opportunity to share my story with you and pray this will be a life-changing adventure! Feel free to drop me an email at val@valmariepaper.com to share any cool God story that comes as a result of these pages. I would love to celebrate with you!

With so much love and gratefulness,
Valerie



Worrier to Warrior

A G U I D E T O P R A Y E R

If you grew up a worried child like I did, you learned very quickly to drop to your knees and start praying. I was scared of everything. The day we had the fire department come to our school to teach us fire safety, I came home and refused to go inside because a fire might happen. I don't know how long I thought this would last. I was also afraid of the dark and burglars, so when twilight hit, I'd have a big decision to make.

Luckily, my mom, the anti-worrier and the prayer warrior, covered my adolescence in truth and prayer. Before I headed out to camp with our church in the mountains, my mom made sure to send me with encouragement for my ears. I had already had both of my eardrums burst in the past from altitude and pressure, so needless to say, even driving in the mountains made me a basket case. I didn't want to miss out on a good time with my besties, though, so I asked my mom to help me. She printed out a prayer and some verses that I started looking over as soon as I got it in my hands. I made sure it was safely tucked in my Bible before we left. It brought me so much comfort to be in the presence of the Lord and to hear His truth. I needed the reassurance that He was with me, and that prayer did it for me.

A few years later in high school, we started every homeroom with prayer. The person who got to pray also got to write all the prayer requests on the chalkboard. (And if you are going to have to sit in homeroom, you might as well get to write on the chalkboard!) I became the annoying girl who raised her hand every day. *Pick me! Pick me!* Pretty soon no one even volunteered. I had commandeered prayer time without even noticing it.

Most people would rather do a speech than pray in front of people. If you want to see me covered in hives, put me up in front of a room full of people to talk. But ask me to pray in front of that same group, and I'm as cool as a cucumber. I much prefer to know everyone's eyes are closed, heads are bowed, and not a soul is staring at the red patches that might be forming on my neck.

Even at my daughter Vivi's baby shower, the hostesses shared five qualities that my husband, Tyler, hoped Vivi would get from me and one was my quickness to pray. He teased that I would pray for EVERYTHING. To be honest, I had no idea how different this was. I assumed everyone did it, but his view of this as a unique quality reminded me that prayer is a learned skill, and I had spent my young, terrified adolescent and teenage life taking the practice test.

Starting this book with the prayer chapter wasn't an accident, and it wasn't just because that's what my business is. It's because prayer can be and should be a part of every chapter that follows. Tim Keller is backing me up on this thought. He shared some incredible words on prayer in his appropriately named book called *Prayer* that helped me realize this was true for everyone and not just the prayer journal girl:

“Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self-knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change—the reordering

of our loves.... It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life.”

So here we are, starting on our journey to a fruit-filled life. I really want this chapter and the next chapter on studying the Bible to lay a solid foundation, because if we don’t, the rest is futile. That sounds dramatic, but it’s true. Remember John 15:5 that I shared in the last chapter? “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Maybe you already know that to be true. The million-dollar question is: does your life reflect that? I know it’s certainly not always the case for me. That’s what this whole book is about—the fruit of what we say we believe. I know I want what I say and what I do to line up. It doesn’t mean I’ll be perfect, but I hope it means God will be glorified and people will be pointed to Christ when they see me.

Although it is clear prayer is important, I think most of us would say we don’t spend adequate time in the presence of the Lord. What is the current state of your prayer life? What things hold you back from deeper communion with Him? One late night while I was writing, I asked y’all on Instagram what stops you from praying or reading your Bible, and you responded:

- you felt it was easy to choose Netflix over prayer time
- you were embarrassed to not have the right words
- you felt you had messed up so much, your prayers didn’t deserve to be heard
- you felt like it’s just a checklist or talking to the air
- you always got distracted mid-prayer
- you didn’t have the desire for it

Have you had any of these thoughts? If so, here’s your proof that

you are not alone.

You may feel overwhelmed by prayer, but be assured, God has made a way for us. Romans 8:26 (ESV) tells us, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

God has provided His spirit to lead us, and He has also given us the Lord’s Prayer as a model for prayer. Growing up in the church, you can hear some concepts so much that you eventually tune them out. Not on purpose. It just happens. One of these for me was that prayer was made up of four different parts. I was reminded of this when reading Keller’s book. He studies and talks about complex concepts, and here he was referencing something I learned in middle school and kind of wrote off as elementary. He noted that the four traditional parts of a prayer are: 1. adoration 2. confession 3. supplication 4. thanksgiving. “We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence.”

Hearing this forced me to realize that my prayers have become a lot less adoration and confession and a lot more asking for things and thanking Him for things; it’s a part of it but not the whole. Let’s go over the four parts.

ADORATION

Prayers of adoration simply mean praising God for who He is, not what He has given. I can’t think of a better way to begin a prayer than acknowledging why God is so worthy of being glorified in this manner. If there were no reason to praise Him, we could end this whole prayer thing here, but, y’all, He is so worthy. This prepares our hearts so beautifully and puts us in a place of

realizing the power He has in the following three parts.

Studying the Bible goes hand in hand with this because as we read, we learn all about His character. Commit to learning the character of God through His Word, and if you are unsure of where to start, I love how Psalm 145 describes His nature. Worship songs are also a great example of prayers of adoration, so feel free to belt it out to open a prayer.

CONFESSION

As I went through a study during Lent, I realized how much confession was lacking in my life. I regularly thought about my sins but usually more so in a “Darn it! I can’t believe I did that!” sort of way. God desires for me to acknowledge my sins and lay them at the cross knowing He already died for all the sins of the world—the ones that came before His death and the ones that would come after.

When we don’t confess our sins, we create a barrier between us and God. We don’t lose salvation, but we hinder our fellowship with Him. If you are feeling particularly distant from God, search your heart and see if there is any sin that hasn’t been brought to light yet. And be on the lookout for pride. It can get in the way of confession because we are constantly looking for excuses for our choices and behavior. Ask for humility and an open heart to accept the truth. Some sins we are not even aware of, so this open heart makes a way for Him to show us.

SUPPLICATION

This is the part of the prayer where we share our requests with the Lord. I think the progression of the other two parts to get here is powerful: we first acknowledge God’s power and second humble

ourselves knowing how much we need Him. A humble heart that prays expectantly to a mighty God is the perfect way to approach the throne of God with our requests. It also keeps us from treating prayer like a genie in a lamp.

This is something I have totally done by the way. I remember praying for a car. It was a hunter green Saturn, to be exact, and I was twelve years old. I remember sitting in my room thinking, *If I believe, it will happen. God will give me this car.* I must have overheard John 14:13 that says, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.” My ESV commentary notes for this verse say, “Praying in Jesus’ name means praying in a way consistent with his character and his will . . . Effective prayer must ask for and desire what Jesus delights in.” How often do our prayers match the desires of the Lord? How often do they contradict them? Are we really surprised when prayers don’t get answered the way we want when they are so far from God’s intent for us?

Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

What does it mean to practically delight in the Lord? To find delight in Him. To do this, I think we have to learn His character and spend time in His presence. I think when we learn His character and appreciate His massiveness, we bend our will to His with the understanding that our desires are better left in His hands to do what He wills. His will doesn’t bend to us. When hearts are changed, desires change too.

THANKSGIVING

The final part is thanking God for all the blessings He has given us. We will discuss this so much more in the chapter on joy, but for now, I’ll simply say, this is the start of joy. Thanksgiving isn’t some fluffy optional part of prayer. It’s essential. To pray prayers

of thanksgiving, our eyes have to be wide open to see all those blessings in our lives. Every morning I pray and ask God to give me eyes to see every blessing. There are days I don't pray that. I can have the exact same set of events but a totally different response: one that is self-focused and ungrateful. It's an essential way to end a prayer. Thanksgiving sets up our whole day with a fresh perspective.

What a beautiful progression for our prayers. Not every prayer we offer to the Lord needs to follow this, or any, specific format but I would encourage you to dig deep and see if any part has been missing in your prayers like confession and adoration have been from mine.

Maybe you have been a Christian for a while and you are comfortable with prayer; but you simply don't make the time to do it. I think part of the reason why is we like instant gratification, and prayer is rarely that. As we open our eyes, our world normally looks exactly the same as before we prayed, and the silence can make us feel unheard. It takes time and patience, but the benefits are rich beyond anything we could hope for. I experience a few different things as a result of my time in prayer:

1. My heart is changed. I think we can get caught up more in how our circumstances are changed as we pray, but I tend to see more change in my heart than anything else. When I quiet my mind and all the things that need my attention so I can pray, I am able to dwell on the truth that I can so easily forget. I remember that God is a God worthy of my praise. That He is all-powerful and in control. I remember that the whole reason I am coming to Him in prayer is because I know He is worthy of it all.

2. My perspective is changed. Sometimes I initially start to pray asking for something I want that I know doesn't line up with God's plan. The very act of bowing my head to pray is a physical reminder that I want to bend my will to God's will, that I want God's desires to be my desires. The prayer I had planned to pray, *Lord make this situation different/better*, turns into, *Lord, your will be done. Carry me through this*. I seek less to get out of something and more to have Him go through it with me. I know challenges have a purpose, but until I'm speaking with this great God of mine, I let little things keep me from remembering this.

3. My circumstances are changed. This is the one we think we want to happen when we start praying. Even when things don't go the way I pray, I see my circumstances change, and I know it is because God's hand is in them. Those seemingly unanswered prayers ARE answered. When I have spent a whole month on my knees praying to the Lord for something and His response is different than my request, I feel all the more confident that God's will is being done. And when I have prayed for something and God answers in my favor, I am all the more confident that God's will is being done. Two different answers can have the same response from me when I know I have prayed about it.

Do you believe all these things could happen when you pray?

In *Prayers for the New Bride*, Jennifer White says, "If we ask God for His help and do not trust Him enough to do what He says, we should not expect to receive anything from Him. Asking and not acting lands us in the category of double-minded and unstable in all our ways" (James 1:6-8).

If you don't yet believe God is capable of answering your prayers, spend some time studying the promises He made in the

Bible. I would also challenge you to start a list of ways God has been faithful to you in the past. This is one thing I love about my prayer journal. When I have moments of doubt, I can look no further than the past two years of answered prayers and see that He has been at work. It's crazy how easily I forget.

And if we still have doubts, God wants to hear that too. David, whom God calls "a man after His own heart," cried out ugly tears and ugly prayers in Psalms. He was confused and didn't understand what God was doing but trusted Him anyway. It's refreshing to read David's messy and honest cries to the Lord and be reminded that God wants us to come to Him with it all.

The very act of praying can be such an elusive thing. There seem to be no boundaries for how they start and end, which makes it hard to stay focused. So many of you stated simple distractions like Netflix or the phone ringing or even the dog barking as things that kept you from prayer. I have an entire chapter on distractions that I hope will help, but here are a handful of tips that have helped me with creating boundaries for my prayers.

1. Make a commitment. Tell a friend. Put it on your calendar. Set your timer. Make it real. This is your prayer time. Otherwise, floating in and out of prayers is inevitable. This is not always a bad thing. God does ask us to pray without ceasing. This can look like a quick sentence or two throughout our day. But you also need time where God has your full, undivided attention.

2. Make it the first part of your day. Don't pick up the things that distract you until after you've had a little time in prayer. It is much easier to fight distractions *before* we are surrounded by them than after.

3. Walk and pray. When I was pregnant, I would walk around

the lake by our apartment and pray for our little girl, my husband, my symptoms, our future, and my business goals. Now with Vivi, our walks are still my favorite prayer time. I set my journal up on her stroller canopy and just start praying. I think the momentum of walking and the energy that it provides help me keep praying. And my desire to keep praying helps me to keep walking. I also don't have all the distractions of home, and I can look up to the heavens and feel a closeness to God that I can't always feel under my roof.

4. Pray out loud. When we are in the car, especially when Vivi is with me, I love to pray. I can get so flustered by traffic or a fussy back-seat driver. Praying calms us both down. My out-loud prayers seem to be the most honest and child-like. My words don't come out perfect. I'll say something that I mean but wish I could take back, but it's out there and I'm given the chance to acknowledge my true feelings instead of hiding behind pomp and circumstance. Praying out loud means we are not only saying the words, but hearing them as well, which helps so much when it comes to our focus. And if you are uncomfortable praying in front of others, praying out loud alone will stretch this muscle.

5. Write down your prayers. Like praying out loud reinforces our focus, if you are saying it in your mind and then seeing it on paper, there is a greater chance of not getting distracted. Share your heart with the Lord like you would write a letter to a friend. It's simple and practical, but it can help.

6. Use a prayer journal. Before I designed the prayer journals, I would keep my prayers in a moleskin journal. This was fine, but I never kept up with it. Being the organization-loving girl I am, having a tool that made it easy for me to keep things straight AND

had monthly sections helped me to make it a real habit instead of an occasional thing. My journal is always with me and I can pray in the car, in a line, everywhere.

7. When the words won't come, ask someone to pray with you. There have been so many moments in my life where I was too distracted or overwhelmed for words to come even when I wanted them to. Ask someone to pray with you. Hearing and believing their words is a powerful thing that draws us close to Him when we feel like it's impossible.

If you change one thing after reading this book, I hope it is regularly communicating with God. And with that, you will have knocked over the domino that can begin knocking over the rest.



H O M E W O R K

WORK IT OUT

Grab your *Lessons from The Finishing School* workbook or your worksheet, **A GUIDE TO PRAYER**, from the website and let the refining begin!

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

A PRAYING LIFE

book by paul e. miller

PRAYER

book by timothy keller

VMP PRAYER JOURNAL

guided prayer journal - valmariepaper.com

VMP CONVERSATIONS JOURNAL

lined journal - valmariepaper.com

Find links to the worksheet and extra resources at
VALMARIEPAPER.COM/HOMEWORK
password: fairlady