

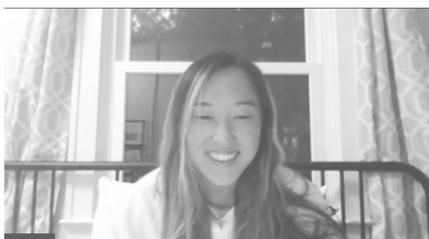
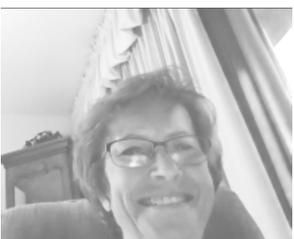


portland
communities

THE EXPERIENCE WORKBOOK

VOLUME 2

BY PASTOR RAY NOAH
WITH PASTOR MATT BLANKENSHIP



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WELCOME TO PORTLAND COMMUNITIES

Welcome to the next chapter of the Portland Communities Experience. Our goal for this experience is for you to deepen your connection with God, His Church and your purpose through the discipleship community with whom you are about to grow.

Portland Communities are about more than another series of classes or church programs rather, they are about true transformation and life change. Through the next eight weeks, it is our hope that you root your life in rhythms of discipleship that draw you closer to God, inspire real questions and conversations and help you find yourself in God's great story.

Communities are both the discipleship intensive you are about to embark on, as well as any small group gathering through the Portland Christian Center family that meets regularly to spend time together, discuss scripture and do life together...serving Christ. In fact, at the end of the Communities experience, you and your group will be uniquely set up to continue growing and serving together as a small group. God's plan is for His Church to grow together in community, which is why Portland Communities is designed to equip you to do just that.

Over the course of the Communities experience, you will engage in the rhythms of learning to be Christ-like. In this guide, you will find daily devotionals designed to engage you in regular reading of scripture and prayer. Through God's power and His working through your group interactions, we pray you will experience spiritual freedom, practice giving and serving sacrificially, and sharing your testimony (your story) about how God has transformed your life.

Whether you are meeting in person or online, this workbook is designed to be a devotional and discussion guide for you. We hope you will read and dwell on the daily devotionals as well as journal answers to the daily response questions. All of this will come in handy for weekly community group discussion.

When we finish this season of Communities, we will celebrate together what God has done and launch you and your group into a new season of exhilarating spiritual growth. Our hope is that you continue these rhythms as your spiritual journey continues beyond Communities. So, come with an open heart and mind, and see how God will surprise you!



COMMUNITIES COVENANT

It is our desire to promote a safe environment for sharing the most important things in life. We want to provide a place where people can reveal openly and confidently the broken areas of their lives without judgment or condemnation. We are not here to “fix” one another. But rather encourage openness, vulnerability and intimacy during discussion and prayer times. To ensure a safe haven for personal sharing, we ask that each Portland Communities participant enter into an agreement of confidentiality. This agreement is between you, your group and God.

Additionally, to get the most out of this experience, our hope is that you make a commitment to attend all sessions and participate in the group discussions. Whether in person or online, consistency and participation are crucial.

I agree to attend as many group meetings as possible and keep all things shared by my group members confidential at all times.

Signed

Date

INTRODUCTION

You are beginning, or perhaps continuing might be a better word, your journey of discipleship through this experience of Portland Communities. It is a lifelong journey, by the way, and it won't end until you stand in Christ's glorious presence, having been finally and fully made like Him—the ultimate goal of discipleship. It is also a journey that is meant to be experienced with others. That is why you will be sharing this discipleship devotion with co-disciples in your Portland Community. Moreover, the adventure of discipleship is the most important journey you will make in life, simply because that is what your Lord has called you into as His follower.

So just what is it that disciples do in the journey? Two things, actually: They reflect and they replicate. That is pretty clear according to what Jesus said in Matthew 28:18-20, what we have come to call the Great Commission:

Jesus came and told His disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

What do disciples do, according to Jesus? First of all, authentic disciples become like their Master. They fully devote themselves to His life and they fully obey His teachings. They become like Jesus in thought, word and deed to the point where His very being is reflected in the essential quality of their being. The Master becomes the sum and substance of their lives. Only by the kind of transformation where the Master is fundamentally reflected from center to circumference in their lives can Christ's disciples in turn “go and make [other] disciples.” Only then can they teach others to “observe all that [the Master] has commanded.”

That is what it means to be truly Christian. Being truly Christian means being an authentic disciple. One cannot happen without the other—Christianity means discipleship; discipleship means Christianity. Being either is not just in name, it is in the reflection of the Master in the life of the disciple. Calling oneself a disciple is simply wishful thinking without doing the things of discipleship and being in essence the reflection of the Master. Call it what you will, anything less is nothing more than inauthentic discipleship, non-Christianity, a false religion. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”

Second, authentic disciples replicate the life of the Master through their lives in the lives of others. In other words, they reproduce. Barren discipleship is non-discipleship. True disciples go with the message, bearing the life of the One they reflect, persuading others who don't follow Christ to follow and model Christ's life so winsomely that fellow disciples are inexorably drawn in to the passionate pursuit of full devotion to Jesus.

Disciples don't just win converts to Christianity, they make new disciples and better disciples. And those disciples in turn replicate the Master's life in others, who themselves replicate the

Master's life in still others.

Reflecting and replicating—that is when discipleship comes full circle and is proven authentic.

So this begs the question: Are you a true disciple? The answer is easy: If you are reflecting Jesus in your life and replicating the life of the Master in others, you are in good discipleship shape.

Now the fact that you are in this experience of Portland Communities tells me that you are interested in this journey to become a fully devoted disciple of Jesus. And that is music to my ears. That is why this devotional book has been produced: to give you yet one more tool to help you to grow in Christ and to give you opportunity to influence others in their spiritual growth as you experience the discipleship journey together.

As you enjoy these daily devotionals with your co-disciples, you will discover that they have been arranged in essential rhythms of discipleship. Over the course of the next eight weeks, your devotional experience will follow these rhythmic patterns that will support your spiritual growth:

- Week 1: Experience Hope – God's future is the best future
- Week 2: Experience Worship – What we give to God
- Week 3: Experience Prayer 201 – Praying through the Psalms
- Week 4: Experience Selflessness – Meeting the needs of others before myself
- Week 5: Experience Encouragement – Insert courage here
- Week 6: Experience Faith – Mountain-moving life
- Week 7: Experience Habits – Daily discipline discipleship
- Week 8: Experience Community – The power of God's people together

Since by your participation in this Portland Communities journey you are demonstrating serious-mindedness about being a true disciple of Jesus, let me suggest that you offer this prayer as you begin:

“Jesus, You said we cannot truly call You Lord unless we do the things You said we should do. With all of my heart, I want to be authentic when I call You Lord. Help me to give You my full devotion and complete obedience. Make me a true disciple, and use my unreserved devotion to inspire others in my Portland Community to themselves want to be like You. In Your great name I pray. Amen!”

And now, let the adventure begin!

Your fellow disciple,







WEEK

1

EXPERIENCE HOPE

DAY 1

BUMMED OUT? PRACTICE HOPE!

Learned Hopefulness

The Big Idea: If you can learn to be helpless, can you also learn to be hopeful? Yes! How? Practice hope. Start by dwelling on the love and kindness that God has for you. Dwell on all the things He has done for you for which you are grateful. Dwell on all the promises He has made to you in scripture. Dwell on the promise of heaven. Basically, just do some reverse worrying. What do you do when you are worried? You dwell on the negative. So just turn that around and dwell on the truth of God's Word. Do that—practice hope—and watch it “rock your world.”

Read Psalm 42:11

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.

I'm not a mental health expert, so don't go throwing away your meds if you are under the care of a medical professional. And please don't take this as the final word on clinical depression; that's not what this is about. So with that caveat out of the way, let me just say that I think the authors of this psalm, the sons of Korah, David's worship team, are on to something.

And since we believe this sacred book, the Bible, is God's perfect revelation of Himself and His will for mankind, then let's lean in to it as our perfect and only rule of faith and practice. Let's treat it as we should—as the first, highest and best authority by which we will live our lives!

So when it comes to the ups and downs that we commonly experience in our daily existence, this Psalm reminds us that the sure path to emotional balance and inner joy is to practice hope. The Psalmist says, “Put your hope in God.” The Apostle Paul said it a bit differently—but he had the same thing in mind: “Put on...hope.” (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

Practice hope! How? Start by dwelling on the love and kindness that God has for you. Dwell on all the things He has done for you for which you are grateful. Dwell on all the promises He has made to you in scripture. Dwell on the promise of heaven. Basically, just do some reverse worrying. What do you do when you are worried? You dwell on the negative. So turn that around and dwell on the truth of God's Word. Do that—practice hope—and watch it “rock your world.”

Don't believe that will work? Well, let me give you just one example of how hope can change you. Suppose you were to receive a phone call later today from an old friend who enthusiastically says, “Hey, I have some good news. You can take a 7-day trip to Hawaii with my company that won't cost you a dime. We have room for two more, but here's the catch: we leave tomorrow evening at 9:00 PM. The boss is taking us on his private jet, and we'll be staying at his beachfront villa in Maui.” You tell him you'll call him right back, and the minute you get off the phone, you

and your spouse, who was listening in, start thinking and planning. Out comes the pen and paper, and you begin to prioritize what you need to do to make this happen. Then you call the friend back, and tell him you're in.

Now if that were really to happen, I guarantee that you would then begin to ruthlessly align your life over the next 24 hours to pull off that all expenses paid trip to paradise. You might say that the hope of Hawaii tomorrow changed the way you lived today.

There is something even better and more permanent than Hawaii. It's called heaven. So why don't you live like you are going there tomorrow—everyday! Here's the deal: You'll be amazed at how hitching your hope to the promise of heaven (or the love of God, or the blessings of salvation, or any other truth of God's Word) will change everything you experience today—even your emotions.

So why don't you give it a try! As the psalm says, "Hope thou in God!"

George Herbert said, "He that lives in hope dances without music." Practice hope, and you will soon be dancing for joy.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You are good, all the time. Even when I don't see You or feel goodness, You are working out Your good and perfect will for my life. You have a perfect record of doing that for Your people. And since that is who You have been throughout all my yesterdays, I completely trust that will be true for all of my tomorrows, too. So in You I put my hope today.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What stands out to you most about practicing hope?
- Do you consider God's Word to be the first, highest and best authority by which we live our lives? If so, what are the implications of this?
- What does it look like in your life to "reverse-worry?"

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Handwriting practice area consisting of 20 horizontal dotted lines.

DAY 2

A HOPE AND A FUTURE

With God, There Are No Disappointments

The Big Idea: Biblical hope doesn't mean you and I will have a problem-free future. That is not a guarantee the Bible makes. Jesus never promised to keep us from the storms of life, but He promised to be with us in those storms, bringing us to the other side. At the end of the day, He has not guaranteed us a life without pain, but a life without stain. The future hope that He has promised means that one day we will stand before His glorious throne without fault (Jude 24), and that is the hope that cannot be cut off!

Read Proverbs 23:18

There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.

What other religion can make the promise of a certain future for you? What government or president or member of Congress or politician can guarantee the hope of tomorrow for you? What other institution, world system, or important person in your life can promise that your hope will not be cut off? The answer: There is none, for only God can give you a hope and a future.

You've got to love that about our Lord. By virtue of His death and resurrection, He alone is qualified to make that promise—and promise He does. He says to you and me that no matter what the track record of our past, no matter what we are facing today, no matter what we may think tomorrow will hold, His victory over sin, hell and death puts Him in the unique position of commanding all of our tomorrows. And His irrevocable and unassailable plan for you is for a bright tomorrow!

Some might think that this is just a typical pie-in-the-sky mentality all religions use to pacify their adherents. But that is not what it is at all for those of us who follow Christ. This is the hope of the Gospel, the promise of the cross, the guarantee of the empty tomb, and as Romans 5:5 says, this is "a hope that will not disappoint." This hope, Hebrews 6:19 says, serves as our "anchor of the soul, firm and secure."

Now, of course, this hope doesn't mean you and I will have a problem-free future. That is not the guarantee Biblical hope makes. Jesus never promised to keep us from the storms of life, but He promised to be with us in those storms, bringing us to the other side. At the end of the day, He has not guaranteed us a life without scars, but a life without stain. The future hope that He has promised means that one day we will stand before His glorious throne without fault (Jude 24), and that is the hope that cannot be cut off!

So wherever you are in the hope department today—and perhaps your hope is running a little low—lean into the words of the psalmist from Psalm 42:11:

*Why art thou cast down, O my soul?
And why art thou disquieted within me?
Hope thou in God: For I shall yet praise Him,
Who is the health of my countenance, and my God.*

Now if that isn't enough, then read Jeremiah 29 in its context, then memorize verse 11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Let that promise from God Himself inform your emotional response to the circumstances of life that would drain you of hope. No matter how hard it gets, no matter how long it takes, no matter how you are feeling, God's plan for your life includes His protection along the way and a prosperous destination.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, Your Word says that You are my shield and my help. So that's my prayer: O Lord, help! I ask You to protect me and fight for me. I'm overwhelmed and powerless by myself, but You've promised to be with me, to be for me, and to make me more than a conqueror. So I ask for a supernatural supply of overcoming power, unshakable confidence, and all-surpassing peace that enables me to meet the challenges of this season with victorious faith. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.



DAILY RESPONSE

- From what source do you get your hope for the future?
- How can you have hope knowing that even in Christ, you don't have a guarantee of a pain-free future in this life?
- If you had to write out a simple prayer about hope, what would you say to God right now? (Now pray it to Him earnestly)

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DAY 3

FAITH, HOPE, AND THE RESURRECTION

How Hope Grows

The Big Idea: Do you practice hope? I am not talking about the breezy kind of optimism that Mary Martin sang about in *South Pacific* when she crooned, “I’m stuck like a dope with a thing called hope.” I am talking about the exercise of hope that declares you are choosing to believe in God’s promises, not just in spite of the evidence, but in scorn of the consequences. We have been called to practice that kind of hope. And Romans 5:5 tells us that this kind of hope will not disappoint us!

Read Romans 4:16-18, 24-25

God’s promise of eternal life is received through the same kind of faith demonstrated by Abraham, who believed in the God who resurrects the dead and creates new things out of nothing. Even when there was no reason for hope, Abraham kept hoping...God will count us righteous too if we believe in Him Who raised from the dead this Jesus who died for our sins and was raised to make us right with God.

I don’t know if you’ve done much thinking about Abraham, but what a true hero of the faith! Here’s a guy who was saved by faith even before there was a Bible or the Law or Christ’s death and resurrection or a community of faith. God appeared to Abraham one day—we’re not even sure if he’d had any previous interaction with God or if this was simply an out of the blue encounter—and Abraham said, “Okay God—I’m on board. What’s next?” And Abraham went on a life-long journey with God in which he became known as a friend of God—that’s a pretty cool designation, isn’t it—and the father of God’s people.

Obviously, Abraham was a very special man, and the Bible holds him up as an example to emulate for believers like you and me. We all ought to be Abraham-like in the spiritual dimension of our lives. But is that even possible? Is there even the smallest chance that I can develop that same kind of Abraham-like relationship with God? Can I attain a walk with God that will be an Abraham-like example to others? And if it’s possible, then how?

Well, it is possible, and I can sum up the “how” in two words: Faith and hope—technically, that’s three words, but work with me!

First, you’ve got to make resurrection the foundation of your faith.

Huh? Well, that’s what Abraham did! Romans 4:17 says, “Abraham believed in the God Who brings back the dead to life.” Abraham was a little ahead of his time—like a few thousand

years—but he believed in the God of the resurrection. What Paul is referring to here is the story of God’s call to Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac on the altar (you can read the story in Genesis 22), and Abraham’s willingness to actually go through with it. Why would Abraham be willing to do such a thing? Because he had faith in the God of the resurrection—the God who could, and would, raise Isaac back to life again.

The truth is, to have that kind of Abraham-like faith, you and I have to have that same Abraham-like level of trust in the God of the resurrection. If you don’t have a foundational and resolute belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and His promise to resurrect you from the dead, your faith will not only not develop to Abraham-like proportions, it will be meaningless. Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 15:14, “If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.”

In other words, if you have no faith in the God of the resurrection, then you are wasting your time reading this devotional, and you’ll never come close to living an Abraham-like life of faith. But the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead proves that God is Who He said He is and will fulfill what He has promised to do. And the faith you place in the God who resurrects the dead will empower you to live the kind of God-honoring faith that Abraham had.

Second, you’ve got to claim resurrection as the basis of your hope.

Where do I get that? Well, again, that’s what Abraham did. Romans 4:18 tells us that “Even when there was no reason for hope, Abraham kept on hoping” and believing in God’s promises that one day he would be the father of many nations when his only son, through whom his lineage would continue, was about to die. In other words, Abraham didn’t let his circumstances dictate his life; God’s promises dictated his life. Abraham believed that if Isaac was going to die on the altar, God would raise him to life. That was his hope.

I don’t know if you have ever thought about this, but the exercise of that kind of hope is arguably the most powerful discipline you can engage in as a believer. Count Bismarck said, “Without the hope of [Christian resurrection], this life is not worth the effort of getting dressed in the morning.” He was right! Christian hope is that important, and that powerful. Karl Marx proclaimed that religious hope is the opiate of the people. But Hebrews 6:19 says, “We have this hope as an anchor of the soul, firm and secure.” And Paul writes in Romans 5:5 that this “hope does not disappoint us!”

Do you practice hope? I am not talking about the breezy kind of optimism that Mary Martin sang about in South Pacific when she crooned, “I’m stuck like a dope with a thing called hope.” I am talking about the exercise of hope that declares that you are choosing to believe in God’s promises, not just in spite of the evidence, but in scorn of the consequences. We have been called to practice that kind of hope.

Faith, hope and the resurrection...that was Abraham’s secret. I have faith that it will be your secret too...at least I hope so!

DAY 4

INSEPARABLE

No Matter What, You Are Never Far From God's Love

The Big Idea: Thank God for Romans 8. It is chock full of encouraging theology that reminds us of the great and unstoppable effort God exerted to redeem us from sin, remake us into the image of Jesus, and ready us to fit into His eternal purposes. From among many other reasons, this is so encouraging because often, on the surface of things, it seems as if precisely the opposite of redeeming, remaking and readying us for glory both in this life and especially in the next is the farthest thing from what is actually happening. It is not; God's love is now actively working in us.

Read Romans 8:35, 38-39

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thank God for Romans 8. It is chock full of encouraging theology that reminds us of the great and unstoppable effort God exerted to redeem us from sin, remake us into the image of Jesus, and ready us to fit into His eternal purposes. From among many other reasons, this is so encouraging because often, on the surface of things, it seems as if precisely the opposite of redeeming, remaking and readying us for glory both in this life and especially in the next is the farthest thing from what is actually happening.

You see, we live in a dual reality. While the work of God mentioned above is inexorably marching toward a glorious conclusion, we are still trapped in the sinful flesh, living in the sin-infested world, under the assault of the king of sin, Satan. And often our sense of reality is that sin—our sin, the world's sin, the unrelenting pressure of the sin-maker—is dragging us in the opposite direction of our redemption.

But the greater reality is that while that may seem to be true, God is at work in you, working out His eternal purposes. And here is the good news: His work is unstoppable! Moreover, while you are living in that dual reality between the awful pull of sin and the unstoppable work of redemption, you are inseparable from the stubborn, persistent, irrevocable love of God.

Did you catch that twice in these verses Paul reminds us of this glorious truth—that between you and God's love the only thing that stands is the word "inseparable"? What is it that can separate you from God's ever-abiding, redeeming, providing, sustaining love? Nothing!

Within the category of “nothing” is a pretty exhaustive list of things that cannot come between you and God’s love: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, the sword; not even death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation. I think that pretty much covers it, don’t you?

Yes, not even your sin—past, present and future—can come between you and God’s love. Christ Jesus made sure of that on the cross.

You are inseparable!

This week, I would challenge you to re-read Romans 8:1-39. Then memorize Romans 8:32, “Since God did not spare even His own Son but gave Him up for us all—won’t God, Who gave us Christ, also give us everything else?”

Meditate on how this verse is to be understood in light of your sinful past (Romans 8:1), your moral weaknesses (Romans 8:5-13), your spiritual identity (Romans 8:14-17), your circumstances, past and present (Romans 8:28), and Satan’s attempts to separate you from God’s love (Romans 8:38-39).

Again, spoiler alert, nothing can separate you from God’s love. And that is the most powerful hope of all.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, thank You that nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever be able to separate me from Your saving, transforming, empowering love. Not my moral weaknesses, not my spiritual insecurities, not my sins—past, present and even future, and not Satan’s best efforts to convince me otherwise. You love me, and that is all that matters.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What is your biggest takeaway from this devotional?
- Have you ever felt separated from God in your life? What did this time feel like?
- Read Romans 8:1-39. What hope of connection to God through Christ does this scripture give you?

DAY 5

IT IS FINISHED—PART 3

The End Is Just The Beginning

The Big Idea: The Great Finisher—that’s Who God is. What He begins, He finishes, and what He finishes He finishes well. And when we get to the ultimate finish, which in reality will just be the beginning, what comes next will be so good that it defies description. Hosea Ballou profoundly noted, “If our Creator has so bountifully provided for our existence here, which is but momentary, and for our temporal wants, which will soon be forgotten, how much more must He have done for our enjoyment in the everlasting world!”

Read Revelation 21:6

It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End.

The Great Finisher—that’s Who God is. What He begins, He finishes, and what He finishes He finishes well.

It Is Finished—Part 1: In Genesis 2:2 we read that “on the seventh day God had finished His work of creation, so He rested from all His work.” For six days, God had created the universe, and after He had finished each day’s work, He pronounced, “It is good.”

Especially good was God’s divine artistry with the earth itself. It was the perfect environment for the highest of His creation, man. It was a place so amazing that God Himself physically strolled with man and woman every day in the wonder and beauty of the divine creation. But then the human couple messed it up by rebelling against God, choosing to sin instead of trusting their Creator.

It Is Finished—Part 2: Fast-forward thousands of years to Christ, when in the fullness of time, God stepped back into His creation to recreate what man had corrupted. The Bible calls Jesus “the second Adam.” The second member of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, became a man, lived a sinless life, and died the perfect sacrifice to redeem what man had lost in Eden—a right relationship with Creator God.

When Jesus hung on the cross, paying the awful price for the sin of the world, He breathed His last breath and said, “It is finished.” He had fully transacted the work of redemption; and as indescribably painful, physically, emotionally and spiritually as that was, it too was good.

It Is Finished—Part 3: But that’s not all—fast-forward at least two thousand years into the future to a date not yet set but quickly drawing near.

After Christ's sacrifice, there was still a world with whom this Good News needed to be shared. Opportunity still had to be given for sinful man to repent, experience redemption and be brought back into that perfect place God had originally intended in the Garden.

Sadly, much of the world would stubbornly reject this great redemptive "do-over." Satan, the god of this world, had blinded the eyes of sinful man. So after the appropriate time had been given for repentance, God brought judgment upon sin, Satan, and stubborn humanity. Everything that had stood in rebellion against this gracious, patient God was cast into eternal punishment. And the sin-corrupted earth—what was once God's most perfect creation—was destroyed by God's holy fire.

Then the God, Who always finishes what He begins, said once again, "It is finished." And what is revealed next is so good that it defies description: a new earth. Read John's description slowly, and as best you can, picture in your mind what God has in store for His redeemed—which includes you and me:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, 'Look, God's home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.'" (Revelation 21:1-3)

Hosea Ballou profoundly noted, "If our Creator has so bountifully provided for our existence here, which is but momentary, and for our temporal wants, which will soon be forgotten, how much more must He have done for our enjoyment in the everlasting world!" And the best part of all will be that once again, you and I will walk personally and physically with God Himself. As Adam and Eve once enjoyed unhindered, uninterrupted fellowship with their Father Creator, so shall we.

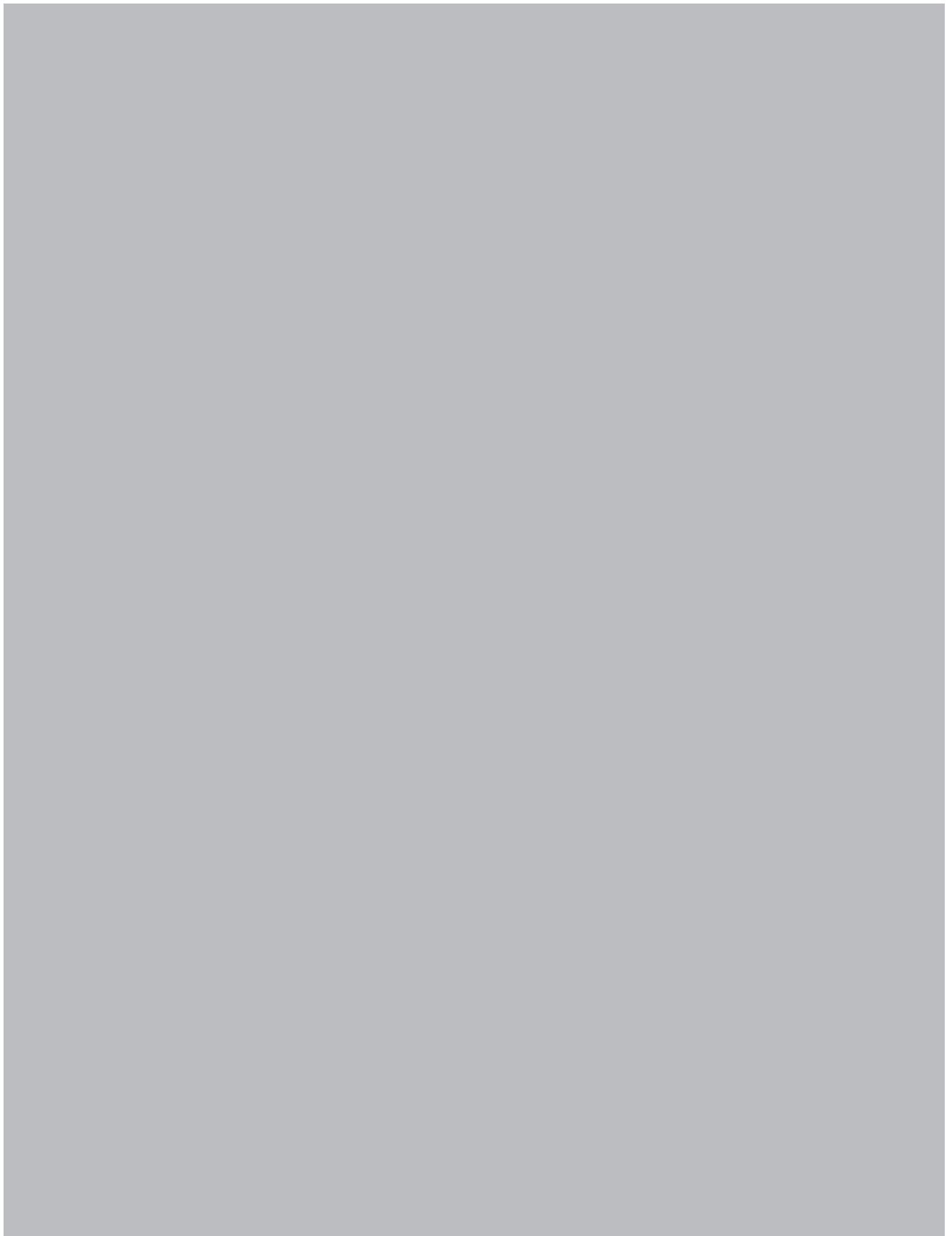
And if you have any doubts about the truth of this promise, hear the words of the Great Finisher Himself:

"And the one sitting on the throne said, 'Look, I am making everything new!' And then He said to me, 'Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.'" (Revelation 21:5)

Blessed is the one who hears God say, "It is finished" for the third time for it too will be "good!"

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I can only imagine what my future home will be like. And best of all, I will be able to commune in perfect fellowship with You, just as Adam once did. Until that day, I will faithfully love, serve and obey You, and long for Your appearing.





WEEK

2

EXPERIENCE WORSHIP

DAY 1

SONGOLOGY

True Worship Needs Both Heart And Mind

The Big Idea: The music of the faith is meant to teach us theology—songology, we might call it. Not so much systematically, but artistically, emotionally, and viscerally. Church music should be evaluated by this and this alone: What it teaches us about God and our relationship to Him. If it doesn't teach doctrine, inspire trust and lead us to obedience, then no matter how lovely the lyrics or moving the melody, perhaps the best thing we could do with it is to toss it in the “we're done with it” bin.

Read Deuteronomy 32:4, 9

Moses recited this entire song publicly to the assembly of Israel: I will proclaim the name of the Lord; how glorious is our God! He is the Rock; His deeds are perfect. Everything He does is just and fair. He is a faithful God Who does no wrong; how just and upright He is! ...For the people of Israel belong to the Lord; Jacob is His special possession.

I love church songs—hymns, simple choruses of the faith and modern worship music. But I'm a little bit weird; I don't just love the music, it's the lyrics that move me—or not. When a song teaches good theology, I'm a fan! Songs that teach theology—let's call it songology. I think that is what the music of the faith is meant to do: teach us theology—not so much systematically, but artistically, emotionally and viscerally. If it doesn't, no matter how lovely the lyrics and moving the melody, I am okay with tossing it into the “we're done with it” bin. Don't worry—it won't be lonely. There is a great multitude of other church songs out there.

Moses wrote a song for the Israelites toward the very end of his days as their leader. He was about to “go the way of all the earth.” That is code for, “I'm about to die.” He was passing the baton of leadership to Joshua, and in his final words to Israel—which went on for several chapters—he was rehearsing their history with God over the past forty years. His last will and testament at times was charming, profound, moving and tender, but then it would take a turn into dead seriousness: Moses was not pulling his punches with Israel's characteristic whiny and rebellious nature. He was also letting loose on what he feared most: that they would wander from God and end up in full on spiritual rebellion in the future, probably sooner than later, knowing them. Fearing that, he warned them in no uncertain terms of what the consequences would be for their unfaithfulness to God.

To put the exclamation mark on his words, he wrote this song that comprises Deuteronomy 32. The song is not just a happy little ditty from their happy old granddaddy. No, much of the song is a foreboding alert—again, he is putting into writing that which will stand as a prophetic testimony against them when they have drifted into rebellion and are experiencing the nasty consequences.

You can listen to the song for yourself. Make sure you read the entire score because while it is often harsh, it reminds us of some very important theology—the doctrine of God that should be heard again in our generation and passed on to the next. But for time’s sake, let me just mention a few bits and pieces of this songology that stuck out to me:

The Doctrine of God: He is our strength, just and fair, perfect in all His ways and utterly righteous. This is especially critical to grasp as you read of the punishment He will unleash on the persistently rebellious. If you read only the imprecatory portions of God’s warning, you will think of Him only as an angry Deity. He is not at all. And He would be none of the things God should be if He didn’t do what He warn He would do.

“He is the Rock; His deeds are perfect. Everything He does is just and fair. He is a faithful God who does no wrong; how just and upright He is!” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

The Reality of Sin: Sin is not simply a mistake, nor is it merely satisfying our preferences. Sin is not God’s children exercising their freedom; it is full on rebellion against the just and righteous Creator. In fact, to persistently live in rebellion against God should call into question the legitimacy of their spiritual heritage.

“But they have acted corruptly toward Him; when they act so perversely, are they really His children? They are a deceitful and twisted generation.” (Deuteronomy 32:5)

The Rule of God: Perhaps forgetting that God is our Father, our Maker, and the One Who established us on the planet is the fundamental reason we sin against God. If we kept in mind that our lives are not our own, we would never ask, “what do I want” but “what does my Owner desire from me?” God has supreme right and authority of rulership over us.

“Isn’t He your Father Who created you? Has He not made you and established you? He established the boundaries of the peoples according to the number in His heavenly court. For the people of Israel belong to the Lord; Jacob is his special possession.” (Deuteronomy 32:6, 8-9)

The Sovereignty of God: God’s self-existence, His supreme authority, His authorship of salvation, His Fatherhood over all mankind are not just lofty doctrine that only theologians grasp and appreciate; this is practical and meaningful theology for our everyday lives. Theology serves as a continual reminder that we must never allow the goodness of life to lull us into independence from the very One Who gives us our life, supplies our every breath, and deserves our moment-by-moment loyalty.

“But Israel soon became fat and unruly; the people grew heavy, plump, and stuffed! Then they abandoned the God Who had made them; they made light of the Rock of their salvation. You neglected the Rock Who had fathered you; you forgot the God Who had given you birth.” (Deuteronomy 32:15,18)

The Praiseworthiness of God: The obvious implication of all this theology is that our response of worship, now and as the ceaseless activity of our lives, is only right and fitting. The sovereign, life-giving, just, fair and righteous God alone is worthy to be praised!

“I myself am He! There is no other god but Me! I am the One who kills and gives life; I am the One Who wounds and heals; no one can be rescued from My powerful hand! Rejoice with Him, you heavens, and let all of God’s angels worship Him. Rejoice with His people, you Gentiles, and let all the angels be strengthened in Him.” (Deuteronomy 32:39,43)

Yep, there’s good songology in Moses’ hymn. And while we don’t know if the music that accompanied it was moving, if the band was hot, if he had backup singers and dancers (which I kind of doubt) or if it hit the Billboard Top Ten Chart, we do know that the words of the song were literally inspired by the Holy Spirit for our benefit. In fact, Moses himself said as post-commentary on the song:

“These instructions are not empty words—they are your life! By obeying them you will enjoy a long life in the land you will occupy when you cross the Jordan River.” (Deuteronomy 32:47)

If that is literally true—which it is, by the way—then we had better start singing.

Take a few minutes today and pour over this song. Then pull out your own bits and pieces of the theology contained in it. Write it down, and add your own commentary. It will be a meaningful exercise in worship. Why go to all that work? As Martin Saunders noted, “If worship is an act of total devotion, then it demands our minds as well as our hearts.” So engage your brain a bit today, merge what you learn with the love and devotion in your heart, and experience some songology of your own.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I sing praises to Your name. You alone are worthy to be worshiped, for You are exalted in holiness and splendor. You alone are just and true. You alone are wise and good. You alone are faithful. You are alone are God, and You are my God.



DAILY RESPONSE

- When you think of the word “worship”, what comes to mind?
- What are some of the top spiritual lessons you have learned from worship music in church?
- Why is it important that the music we use for worship be theologically sound?

Handwriting practice area consisting of 20 horizontal dotted lines.

DAY 2

PRE-FLIGHT CHECKLIST FOR WORSHIP

Prepare To Praise

The Big Idea: Do you prepare for worship, or just unthinkingly slip into it? While spontaneous praise that overflows from the heart is a good thing, so is deliberate worship. I would suggest that you develop a pre-flight checklist for you and your family as you come to corporate worship. It may seem awkward and feel a bit rehearsed, but do it once in a while, and see if it doesn't enhance your experience of God's presence.

Read Psalm 100:4

Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name.

How do you prepare for worship?

Perhaps you have a set routine as you ready yourself for church services, or maybe you don't. It could be you go through a checklist of pre-flight instructions—I doubt it. Quite likely, your preparations for church just simply happen—a random scramble followed by a mad dash to get you, the kids and the dog out the door. Hopefully, the dog doesn't go with you! I totally understand that scene.

I would like to suggest a couple of things, however, that will not only enhance and elevate your experience of worship, but it is wholly appropriate in light of the One you are preparing to worship. First of all, as you and your family are driving to church, go through a preflight checklist of things for which you are grateful. And just so it doesn't become routine, add this rule: Your thankfulness has to be from the past seven days.

Second, actually begin to sing a song of praise as you drive onto the church parking lot. As you walk up to the church, sing to the Lord. I know, people will think you are weird—who cares. They're just thinking the obvious. The parking team may give you a quirky look, but what does that matter? You aren't singing for their benefit; you're singing for Jesus. I know: I've lost you on this one, but I'm serious. Try it for a month, along with the gratitude exercise, and see if it doesn't elevate your worship game.

By the way, I am not the first to suggest such a thing. Two hundred years ago, John Wesley printed a pre-flight checklist in the front of the hymnbook he authored. Here are his "Directions For Singing":

1. Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.
2. Sing them exactly as they are printed here without altering or mending them at all.
3. Sing all. See that you join with a congregation as frequently as you can; let not a slight degree or weariness hinder you.
4. Sing heartily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength.
5. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation so that you may not destroy the harmony.
6. Sing in tune. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it, do not run before or stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move there exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow.
7. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing.

Great—you can sing heartily, but no bawling!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I confess that when I worship You, I don't always come with a heart that is prepared to experience Your wonder. So on this day, I stop to think about who You are, what You have said, what You want and what You deserve from me. Help me to fully prepare to meet You in this moment of praise.



DAILY RESPONSE

- ⦿ Do you prepare yourself to come into God's presence? If so, how? If not, how do you think you could start?
- ⦿ What kinds of new habits could you start personally and with your family to prepare for and engage in worship through song regularly?
- ⦿ What does this devotional teach us about the priority of worship music in our lives over all other music?

DAY 3

MAKE MUSIC IN YOUR HEART

You've Got A Song In There Waiting To Come Out

The Big Idea: Might I suggest that maybe you, too, have a song in your heart? In fact, if you truly appreciate what Jesus has done for you, you should. So why not make music in your heart, at least to the Lord? Perhaps you should even begin to record your songs. You see, what is in your heart—the love and gratitude that is there toward God—is a song in unrecorded form. No one other than God and you may read it, but the God part of that combination is reason enough for you to write it. And who knows, maybe at some point in your life, or after your life ends, others may pick up what you have done and be inspired to make music in their own heart with the song that God has put there.

Read 1 Chronicles 23:1-4

When David was old and full of years, he made his son Solomon king over Israel. He also gathered together all the leaders of Israel, as well as the priests and Levites. The Levites thirty years old or more were counted, and the total number of men was thirty-eight thousand. David said, "Of these, twenty-four thousand are to be in charge of the work of the temple of the Lord and six thousand are to be officials and judges. Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the Lord with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose."

David was quite the Renaissance man, and that was way before the Renaissance Age. His skill, knowledge and artistry were well known among his peers, and his renown for matters of leadership, warcraft, musicianship and spirituality continue even to this day. No wonder he was and is the most loved king in the Bible.

Among David's many achievements, none is greater than the contribution he made to the songbook of the human race, the Psalms. David was a songwriter par excellence, and a choreographer of immense creativity—he was able to direct skilled musicians in putting together the worship services of the temple—and a skilled craftsman of fine musical instruments. David's all around artistic accomplishments are unmatched, even to this day.

That is mostly because David had a song in his heart. Music was not something that was manufactured; it was organic to him. When he was just a boy, he began playing a harp, writing songs, and performing to the flock of sheep over which his father had given him charge. David's worship bubbled out from his core to the Lord, and over much time, in long stretches of solitude, refined by circumstances in which he met God's deliverance, the sweet singer of Israel honed his craft. He became greater and greater as a singer, songwriter and musician. And while we will never truly know the expanse of David's artistry, we do have the book of Psalms that surely impresses us with the brilliance of this man!

So other than great appreciation for the multifaceted talents of David, what should this mean to you? How should you apply this to your life? Might I suggest that maybe you too, have a song in your heart? In fact, if you truly appreciate what Jesus has done for you, you should. So why not make music in your heart, at least to the Lord? The Apostle Paul says that is actually a function of the Spirit-filled life:

Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:18-20)

So with the Spirit’s help, at the very least, why not start with writing down your song? A song? Yes, what is in your heart—the love and gratitude that is there toward God—is a song in unrecorded form. So record it; write it down. Every day, or once a week, or at some regular interval, commit to writing down your thoughts in journal form. No one other than God and you may read it, but the God part of that combination is reason enough for you to write it. And who knows, but maybe at some point in your life, or after your life ends, others may pick up what you have done and be inspired to make music in their own heart with the song that God has put there.

What might seem like a silly activity could actually be what inspires even more worship to the God who truly deserves much more than what we have given.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I sing to You a new song. My heart is full of love for Your goodness and mercy unto me. I lift my praise for Who You are and gratitude for all You have done. This is my love song to You, now and for all time.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **What stands out to you most in this teaching?**
- **If you had to give a name to the “song in your heart” what would you call it?**
- **This week, use the notes section in this devotional to write a few song lines that come to mind as you spend time with the Lord. It doesn’t have to be a whole song or even rhyme (but that would be fun if you can swing it)...just write what God is putting in your heart.**

DAY 4

DESIGNER DEITY SYNDROME

Beware Of Made To Order Worship

The Big Idea: As Newsweek Magazine said of many modern American worshipers, “They’ve developed a pick and choose Christianity in which individuals take what they want and pass over what does not fit their spiritual goals...” That is what we might call “designer god syndrome.” They want to worship a god made in their image, to their specifications. But nothing could be further from the “spirit and truth” worshiper that Jesus said God the Father is seeking. When it comes to God, and the way you worship Him, you need to start saying, “God, what do You want?” Me too! As Jack Hayford says, “Worship changes the worshiper into the image of the One worshiped,” not vice versa.

Read John 4:21-24

Jesus replied, “Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the One you worship, while we Jews know all about Him, for salvation comes through the Jews. But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship Him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

This Samaritan woman that Jesus encountered at the well of Sychar was suffering from what I call “designer deity syndrome”. This was a fairly common syndrome among worshipers, not only in Jesus’ day, but in ours as well. It occurs when we attempt to come to God on our terms rather than His; when we make worship more about us, and what we like, than about God, and what He likes; when, in effect, we recreate God in our image rather than approaching Him as beings created in His image.

That was the problem with the worship of the Samaritans. They had corrupted worship to fit their own needs to that point Jesus said, “You Samaritans know very little about the One you worship.” (John 4:22) They had become Burger King worshipers. Do you remember the old Burger King advertisement? “Hold the pickle, hold the lettuce, special orders don’t upset us. Have it your way.”

That little jingle is fitting for what we modern day “Samaritans” are doing with our experience of worship. We love a customized church experience. We expect worship services to be tailor-made just for us. We expect the praise, programs and preaching to satisfy our preferences. We want church designed to meet our needs, music tuned to our exact tastes, preachers crafted to our specifications, messages that mesmerize, and a made-to-order god—a “Burger King god” who says, “Have it your way”.

Some time ago, Los Angeles Magazine ran an article called “God For Sale”. The author said, “It is no surprise that when today’s affluent young professionals return to church they want to do it only on their own terms. But what is amazing is how far the churches are going to oblige them.” Newsweek Magazine added, “They’ve developed a pick and choose Christianity in which individuals take what they want and pass over what does not fit their spiritual goals” That’s “designer god syndrome.”

Nothing can be further from the “spirit and truth” worshiper of verse 24 that Jesus said God the Father is seeking. When it comes to God and the way you worship Him, you need to start saying, “Have it your way”. Me too! As Jack Hayford says, “Worship changes the worshiper into the image of the One worshiped.”

If you will learn what it means to do that, you will drink water from an altogether different kind of well—and you will never thirst again, as Jesus told the Samaritans in John 4:14.

Honestly evaluate your worship expectations. Do you approach worship asking God how He prefers your worship? Or do you tell God, albeit in not so many words, “This is how I want it”? If it is the latter, a little repentance is in order.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, in my life and in my worship, I want what You want. I want You to have it Your way. I want to be numbered among those who are the kind of worshipers You are seeking—a true spirit and truth worshiper.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **Have you ever found yourself judging a church based on its musical style? Write and/or talk about this.**
- **What is the style of worship that God prefers?**
- **Write and comment about the statement, “Worship changes the worshiper into the image of the One worshiped.”**

DAY 5

WARMING UP FOR ETERNITY

The Continual Activity Of Heaven

The Big Idea: The day is coming—sooner than you think—when you will be eternally at home in heaven. Finally, freely and fully, you will be able to express your love and devotion to God without earthly limitations. But until then, you have opportunity to worship God in the community of the saints as you gather to praise him in church. When you lift your voice in song, you are practicing what you will be doing one day in heaven.

Read Revelation 4:8

*Holy, holy, holy,
Is the Lord God Almighty,
Who was, and is, and is to come.*

When you read John’s awesome, breathtaking description of God upon His throne, it only makes sense that the continual activity of heaven is the worship of the Almighty. What else can the angels, elders and all living creatures do except to fall before the Creator and worship?

That, too, is what you and I will do when we get there. One second in God’s presence and we will be overcome with worship. Our eyes, our minds, our mouths, our hearts, our bodies—every fiber of our beings—will be completely and irrevocably undone when we finally gaze upon Him Who loves us more than we can comprehend and infinitely more than we deserve. At that moment, we, like the other occupants of heaven, will fall before the throne and join the chorus singing;

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—
the One Who always was, Who is, and Who is still to come.”

That day is coming—sooner than you think. Finally, freely and fully, you will be able to express your love and devotion to God without earthly limitations. Until then, you have opportunity to worship God in the community of the saints as you gather to praise Him in church. When you lift your voice in song, you are practicing what you will be doing one day in heaven. C.S. Lewis observed, “The Scotch catechism says that man’s chief end is ‘to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.’ But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”

So lose yourself in the wonder of worship now. You are only engaging in the activity of heaven. If you are bored with worship now; if you don’t like the style of worship now...if you see worship as the warm up act for the sermon now—then you are not going to enjoy heaven all that much.

The next time you have opportunity to worship, imagine yourself before the throne of God with all of the redeemed—and cut loose with your praise. The details of the worship service do not matter—the song selection, the style of music, the worship leader, the skill of the musicians. Worship is not for you anyway; it is for God.

So express yourself as best you know how and give all the glory and praise to God. Make it your aim to bring a smile to your Heavenly Father’s face.

You are going to do that someday in heaven. Why not perfect your worship in the here and now!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You are worthy of praise. All glory and honor belong to You. You are holy, and You alone deserve my worship.

 **DAILY RESPONSE**

- What were some of your first imaginations of what heaven would be like?
- What does scripture say we will be doing for eternity in heaven?
- Do you ever feel like you are closer to God more than any other time when you are worshipping in song?
- How can you express yourself in song worship this week in a way that honors God?

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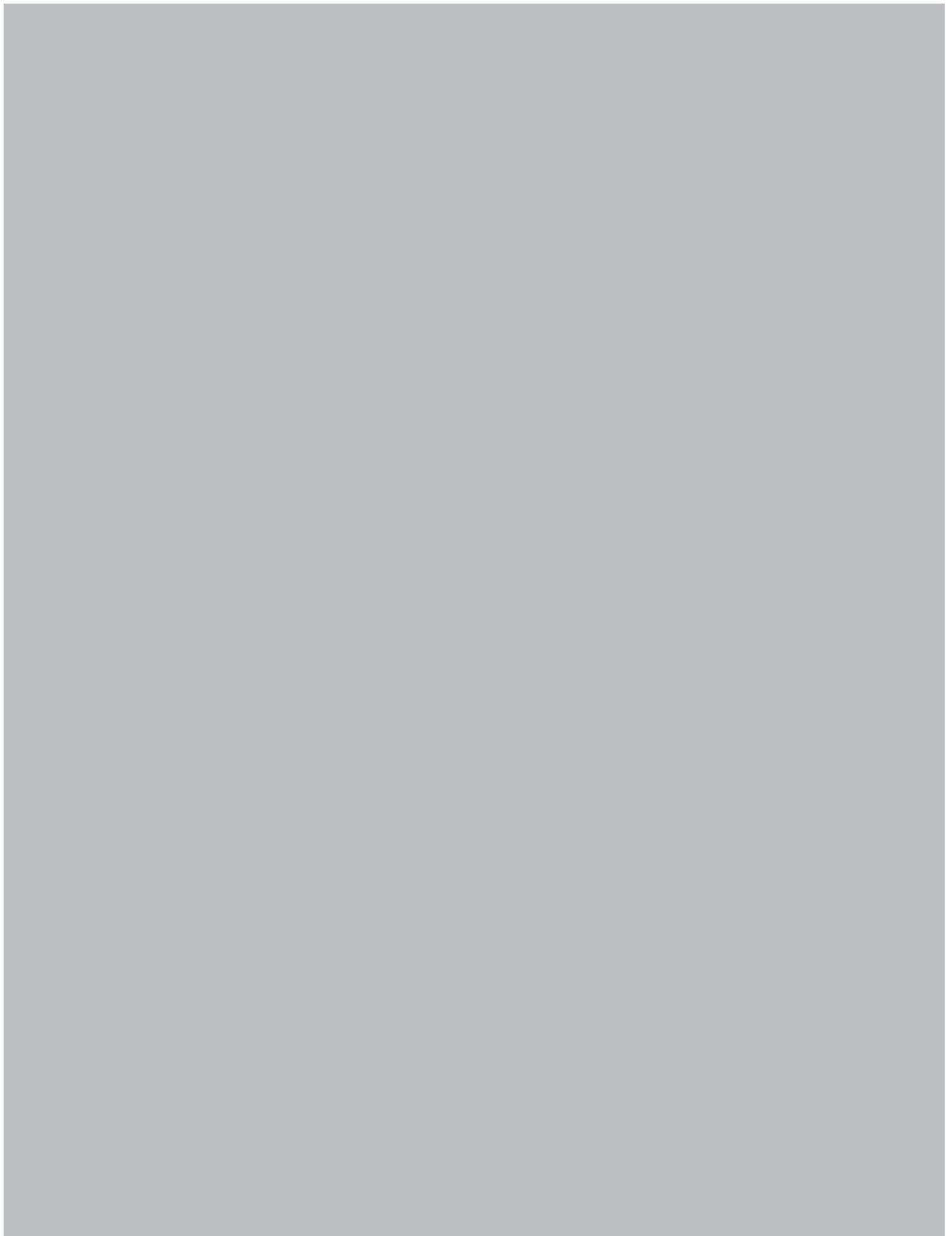
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WEEK

3

EXPERIENCE PRAYER 201

DAY 1

THE INCREDIBLE THERAPY OF PRAYER

Pray, And Let God Worry

The Big Idea: The Psalms has been called the songbook for the human race. But it is first a prayer book. David often put his prayers to music, which is how we know them, but an overwhelming number of them were first prayers. And what we find in David's prayers is that they were incredibly therapeutic to his soul. They will be for yours, too. As you read through this Psalm, you will see that David was downcast. Like you and me, he was facing the gritty, raw reality of life, and he just couldn't catch a break. But in this prayer, the more David poured out his heart honestly before God, the more his spirit begins to lift by the end of the psalm, he was able to declare, "The Lord accepts my prayer." That will be the case for you, too, when you honestly pour out your heart to God.

Read Psalm 6:6-10

I am worn out from my groaning.

All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.

My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes.

Away from me, all you who do evil, for the Lord has heard my weeping.

The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer.

All my enemies will be overwhelmed with shame and anguish; they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.

There are times, to be quite honest, when life stinks. Satan attacks, or people say vicious things, or circumstances threaten to sink your ship, or sin weighs you down, or your body breaks down—or all of the above. It is in times like these that, understandably, you just don't have a positive outlook on life.

So the question is: What do you do about it? Well, you can just grit it out. Or you can talk to caring people who will encourage you. You can pay a therapist to listen to how bad life is for you. You can hire a personal coach to walk you through it. Those aren't necessarily bad options—and in fact, you may need to employ all of them.

But the most effective therapy is prayer! And best of all, it's free. It won't cost you a thing, except your time and your honesty before God.

David was in quite a pessimistic state of mind. Something was happening that he couldn't fight his way through. He was down, and despaired of life itself. He spent sleepless nights and soaked his pillow with tears of anguish, with no relief in sight. As you read his words, you get

the feeling that it was time of severe illness for the king, and it became an occasion that David's enemies seized upon to vent their animosity and unleash their criticism.

But David prayed. That's what David did—a lot! In this case, he decided to do what Martin Luther suggested: "Pray, and let God worry."

As you read through Psalms, you will often see how David was downcast because of the challenges of dire circumstance, difficult people, and personal failure. Like you and me, he faced the gritty, raw reality of life, and sometimes it seemed that he just couldn't catch a break. But in those psalms, you will notice that the more David pours out his heart honestly before God, the more his spirit begins to lift by the end of the psalm, and before you know it, the reality hits David that his life is squarely in the hands of his loving Father—where it has been all along.

Had David's circumstances suddenly changed? Not necessarily. What had changed was David's perspective. That's what honest prayer does. David had suddenly come to the realization yet again that through the therapy of prayer, he had received an answer better than the one he had brought at the beginning of his prayer—the gift of being in the very presence of God.

That's always the best answer to prayer, by the way: Just spending time in God's presence.

That's what prayer will do for you, too. It's the best therapy!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, hear my cry. I am overwhelmed and downcast. I have no answer, no plan, no hope—outside of You. So I lift my desperation to You; hear my cry for mercy and accept my prayer. Meet the need of my life according to Your plan, and most of all, draw me close to You.



DAILY RESPONSE

- When you are facing tough times, do you grit it out, talk to other people or talk to God? (If you do more than one, which usually comes first?)
- Have you ever found that you felt differently about your circumstances after you prayed? If not, what circumstance do you need relief in right now?
- Take some time to journal the top 5 things you need to pray about this week and commit those to prayer every day.

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DAY 2

COME CLEAN

There's Nothing Like The Grace Of Repentance

The Big Idea: Psalm 51 provides a great case study in authentic repentance. King David wasn't wanting just to off-load his guilt by getting this sin off his chest. He wasn't just attempting to get a pass by coming clean. He wasn't just feeling sorry because he had been caught. Not at all! David recognized the utter horror of having offending a holy God. He realized the indescribable pain of having messed up the lives of people over whom he had just played God. He fully confessed his wicked act, and the wicked heart that had led to the act. (Psalm 51:5) And by so doing, David cast himself upon God's infinite mercy, recognizing that only then could he be granted a heart that was truly clean, tender to the Lord, and willing to do the things that God desired. (Psalm 51:10-13,17)

Read Psalm 51:10-12

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

Renew a loyal spirit within me.

*Do not banish me from your presence,
and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.*

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and make me willing to obey You.*

I can't imagine the depth of David's anguish as he came before the Lord carrying the guilt and shame of the Bathsheba affair. He had committed adultery, he had conspired to commit murder, he had murdered a gifted and loyal soldier, he had covered his tracks for several months—and all the while he was miserable.

But when a courageous prophet named Nathan stood before David, the most powerful man in the world, a man who held the power of life and death over pesky little prophets like Nathan, and confronted the king with this evil—his evil—David repented. And in this moving prayer of contrition before the Lord, which is what Psalm 51 really is, King David expressed to God the depth of shame and humility that revealed why, in spite of such a horrible sin, he was still a man after God's heart.

This psalm provides a great case study in authentic repentance. David wasn't wanting just to off-load his guilt by getting this sin off his chest. He wasn't just attempting to get a pass by coming clean. He wasn't just feeling sorry because he had finally been caught. Not at all! David recognized the utter horror of having offending a holy God. He realized the indescribable pain of having messed up the lives of people over whom he had just played God. He fully confessed his wicked act, and the wicked heart that had led to the act. (Psalm 51:5) And by so doing, David

cast himself upon God's infinite mercy, recognizing that only then could he be granted a heart that was truly clean, tender to the Lord, and willing to do the things that God desired. (Psalm 51:10-13,17)

I cannot imagine David's pain! Or can I? Have I not offended the Lord just as coldly and willingly as David? Have I not committed emotional murdered, conspired to cover my tracks, been willfully unfaithful and concealed sin before a holy God Who demands holiness in me? Yes—I have! Not visibly, but certainly in my heart—at the very core of what makes me fully me—which Jesus pointed out is just as offensive to a holy God and corrosive to my spirit as the physical act of sin. (Matthew 5:21-28)

You see, I am David in this psalm. And so are you. We are in no less need of the mercy and grace of Almighty God than this heartbroken king. And not only are we, too, in need a God Who will forgive all of our sins, but we are in desperate need of a merciful God Who will create within us a clean heart and grant us a willingness to fully obey.

True repentance—what a grace! Only then can we know the deepest and best joy of all: The joy of our salvation! (Psalm 51:12)

If and when there is sin in your heart, do what David did. Repent, and you will find what the Anabaptist reformer Menno Simons wrote: "Wherever there is a pulverized and penitent heart, there grace also is, and wherever there is a voluntary confession not gained by pressure, there love covereth a multitude of sins."

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, "create in me a clean heart, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit."(Psalm 51)



DAILY RESPONSE

- What do you think the difference is between a confession and authentic repentance?
- What stands out to you about the statement, "Create in me a clean heart, oh God."
- What is God speaking to you about repentance through this teaching?

DAY 3

PRAYER FOR A ONCE MIGHTY NATION

Early And Often, Intercede For Your Country

The Big Idea: How do you pray for a once-godly nation that is now suffering the just punishment for rebellion? You do what the psalmist did: boldly, persistently and unashamedly pray for restoration! You see, at the end of the day, whether it is a rebellious Israel or a rebellious America or a rebellious you, our appeal for restoration is not based on national or human worthiness, it is rather rooted in the immutable character of God—Who is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and delights to show mercy rather than send calamity!

Read Psalm 80:19

Restore us, O LORD God Almighty; make Your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

How do you pray for a once-godly nation that is now suffering the just punishment for rebellion? You do what the psalmist did: boldly, persistently and unashamedly pray for restoration!

Three times the psalmist made the exact same appeal for the restoration of Israel—Psalm 80:3,7,19. Each appeal is more intense than the previous, building to this crescendo of importunity in the final verse. He even sneaks in another plea for revival in the penultimate verse—Psalm 80:18. This guy is bent on spiritual awakening and national renewal in Israel!

What is interesting about Psalm 80—which you would agree is especially applicable for America for right now—is that this desperate cry for restoration came during a time when the Almighty had removed His blessing because of the nation’s persistent rebellion. It was most likely written at the tail end of the Northern Kingdom’s rebellious run as a nation, and they were suffering the harsh reality of life without the protective hand of God—deservedly so!

How like America! We, too, have strayed from our once declared dependence upon the Almighty’s protective hand. We have abandoned the collective sense of our national *raison d’être*: To serve God’s purposes in the earth. Our belief that American exceptionalism results only from Divine Sovereignty has been severely damaged, perhaps without remedy. As others have said, we have traveled so far down the road of spiritual rebellion that God will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorah if He withholds punishment on this nation much longer. That is really what we deserve.

But in truth, isn’t what was true of Israel, and what is true of America, true of you and me, too? At the end of the day, aren’t we all undeserving of anything but God’s judgment? Yet what is even more interesting about Psalm 80 is that the appeal for restoration is not based on the worthiness of Israel; it is rather rooted in the immutable character of God—Who is gracious,

compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and delights to show mercy rather than send calamity! (Psalm 103:8-14, Joel 2:13, Micah 7:18)

God has been very clear that consequences will follow sin; the law of sowing and reaping is unmistakably clear in Scripture. Yet the psalmist, along with other Biblical writers, often placed their hope in the mercy of God—and prayed like crazy for a crop failure.

I think it's okay to pray for a crop failure. In fact, I would even say it's wise to pray that way. Why? God may just substitute His mercy for discipline. The Message translation says of God in Micah 7:18, "Mercy is Your specialty."

Since mercy and grace are what make God, God, why not tap into them and pray for the restoration of a once mighty nation—and perhaps, a once blessed life! As Charles Spurgeon said, "Free grace can go into the gutter, and bring up a jewel!"

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I lift my nation to You. While we have drifted from our divine calling, have rejected Your ways, and deserve Your judgment, I pray for mercy. O Lord, restore us. Make Your face shine upon us that we may be saved. Send a spiritual awakening to our land, that we might be a mighty force for Your glory once again.

 **DAILY RESPONSE**

- How do you think you should be praying for our country?
- How do we pray for restoration even when we are clearly unworthy?
- Now may be as good a time as ever to pray for another spiritual awakening in the United States of America. Would you commit to joining Portland Christian Center in praying for a great awakening starting right here in Portland?

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Handwriting practice area consisting of 20 horizontal dotted lines.

DAY 4

ROOM FOR ONLY ONE GOD

The Most Powerful Prayer You Can Pray

The Big Idea: The issue of godship is more prevalent than we care to admit. You see, when we fret and worry over matters we can't control, when we meddle and manipulate to get our plans fulfilled, when we come to God after the fact for help, when we pray as a last resort rather than a first resort, when we cut corners in our financial stewardship because we can't afford to give to the Lord's work, and when we put our hope in government (or anything else) at the expense of our trust in God, in effect, we have removed God from His rightful throne. There is room for only one God in your life, so let God be God.

Read Psalm 131:1

My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.

There is only One Who is God—and that's not you! Basically, that is what King David is saying of himself in this brief song of assent. The Message translates verse one this way:

God, I'm not trying to rule the roost,

*I don't want to be king of the mountain.
I haven't meddled where I have no business
or fantasized grandiose plans.*

Yet this issue of godship is more prevalent than we care to admit. You see, when we fret and worry over matters we can't control, when we meddle and manipulate to get our plans fulfilled, when we come to God after the fact for help, when we pray as a last resort rather than a first resort, when we cut corners in our financial stewardship because we can't afford to give to the Lord's work, and when we put our hope in government (or anything else) at the expense of our trust in God, in effect, we have removed God from His rightful throne.

There is room for only one God in your life, so let God be God. He has a great track record in that role, you know, and you don't.

And by the way, when you allow God to be God, good things happen for you:

- You become the recipient of greater grace. Recognizing God's rightful role takes true humility (the opposite of pride and haughtiness), as David describes, "My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty" (Psalm 131:1a.) Of course, the Bible repeatedly tells us this is always the catalyst for greater grace. (Proverbs 3:34)

- You become the recipient of greater security. You put things that are above your pay grade back into the hands of the only One wise enough to handle them—what David calls “great matters or things too wonderful for me” (Psalm 131:1b (See how Paul describes them in Romans 11:33-36)
- You become the recipient of greater confidence. Someone else is running the universe, which means you don’t carry that great weight upon your shoulders. David says, “But I have stilled and quieted my soul” (Psalm 131:2a)...which is possible only when you first walk with the Shepherd Who leads you beside quiet waters and restores your soul.
- You become the recipient of greater contentment. David describes it, “like a baby content in its mother’s arms, my soul is a baby content” (Psalm 131:2b MSG) Paul says, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” (1 Timothy 6:6)
- You become the recipient of greater hope. “O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore.” (Psalm 131:3). It is by Biblical hope, as Paul teaches, “we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?” (Romans 8:24) “Hope,” as Paul says in Romans 5:5, “does not disappoint us...”

Hmmm...grace, security, confidence, contentment, hope. I think I’ll let God be God! How about you?

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I have one passion; It is You, and You only. You are my Lord and my Savior, the rightful and sole Ruler of the throne of my heart. Today and for all my days, I declare You are God over me.



DAILY RESPONSE.

- ☉ **Have you ever tried to please more than one person at a time? What was this like?**
- ☉ **How does letting “God be God” help you?**
- ☉ **The unfortunate truth is that we often put ourselves before God. Take some time to examine yourself with the Lord today. How have you made God second or third or fourth...and in what areas do you need to elevate Him to number one?**

Handwriting practice area consisting of 25 horizontal dotted lines.

DAY 5

ZIP IT

The Prayer That Can Change Your Life

The Big Idea: What does your mouth reveal about your heart? If we were to play back a tape recording of every conversation you've had this week, what would we learn about you? That you have a bitter, angry, hurtful, doubtful heart, or that your heart is faithful, hopeful and loving? David knew he would need supernatural help if he were going to get both heart and mouth in the right place with God. That's why he prayed for Divine help. You and I need to pray that too, like every day! We can't do it alone. I know I can't—I'm living proof of that. But God will help us if we sincerely ask Him. He never encourages us to do something that He is not willing to help with. And if we get God's help, there isn't anything we can't do, even zipping our lips!

■ **Read Psalm 141:3**

Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.

The Puritan preacher, Thomas Watson wrote, "God has given us two ears, but one tongue, to show that we should be swift to hear, but slow to speak. God has set a double fence before the tongue, the teeth and the lips, to teach us to be wary that we offend not with our tongue."

One researcher has found that the average American has 30 conversations a day and will spend one-fifth of their life talking. In one year's time, your conversations could fill sixty-six books at 800 pages each.

How come, with so much practice speaking, few of us have ever gained complete or even consistent mastery of the content of our communication?

Think about it: Just a few inflammatory words set off a chain of events that look like World War III in your life. You come home from work tired and cranky, and yell at your spouse. Your spouse then yells at the oldest kid, who in turn, yells at his little sister. She goes out and kicks the dog, so the dog bites the cat. The cat comes in and scratches the baby, and the baby rips the head off the Barbie doll.

Wouldn't it be a whole lot simpler if you just skipped to the end of the flow chart and ripped off the Barbie's head in the first place?

Our words matter! Proverbs 18:21 reminds us that our words can either kill or they can give life. That's how powerful they are. And more importantly, our words reveal what is going on within us. Matthew 12:34 says that our words only reveal what is already inside our heart. That is why controlling our mouth must begin with reforming our heart.

So what does your mouth reveal about your heart? If we were to play back a tape recording of every conversation you've had this week, what would we learn about you? That you have a bitter, angry, hurtful, doubtful heart, or that your heart is faithful, hopeful and loving?

David knew he would need supernatural help if he were going to get both heart and mouth in the right place with God. That's why he prayed for Divine help. You and I need to pray that too, like every day! We can't do it alone. I know I can't—I'm living proof of that. But God will help us if we sincerely ask Him. He never encourages us to do something that He is not willing to help with.

And if we get God's help, there isn't anything we can't do, even zipping our lips!

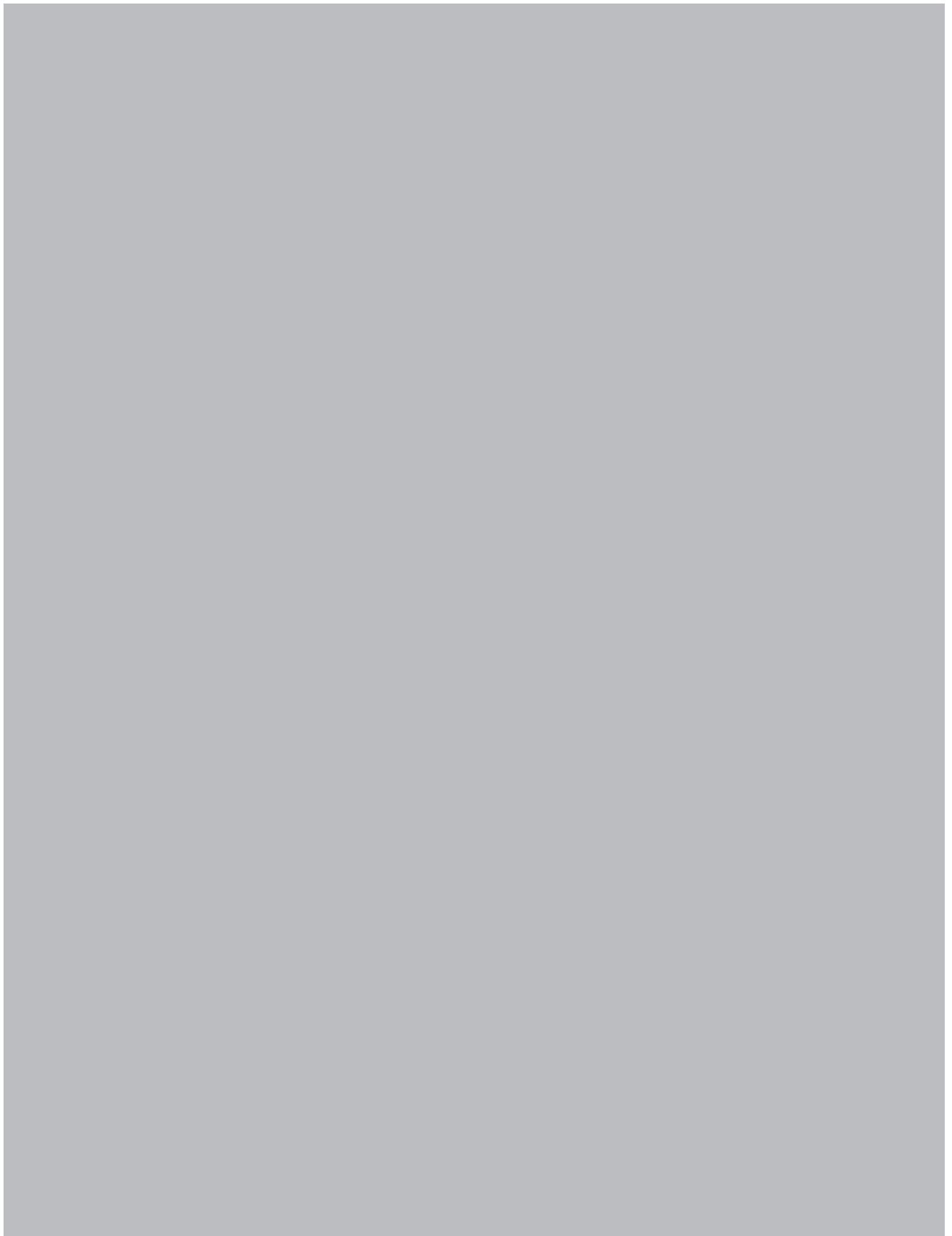
A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I really need Your help on this one. I have tried and failed so many times at managing my mouth. So I ask today, would You set a guard over my mouth? Would You keep watch over the door of my lips? Give me Your ever-flowing strength to make the words of my mouth pleasing to You.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **Have you ever said too much, only to realize you would have been better off stopping one sentence earlier? Recall a time this was the case and write it down.**
- **Think about the statement, "Our words matter." Read Proverbs 18:21 and Psalm 141:3 and write/comment on what God is revealing to you about your speech.**
- **Where do you need to zip it this week, and where do you need to call out to God with your words in prayer?**





WEEK

4

EXPERIENCE SELFLESSNESS

DAY 1

AT YOUR MOST CHRIST-LIKE

Serving Your Way To Greatness

The Big Idea: If you are going to be a fully devoted follower of Christ, you will have to think, do and live like Jesus thought, did and lived—not the least of which is to take on the attitude, exhibit the actions, and live the lifestyle of a servant. Yes—you will have to serve your way to the top!

Read John 13:14

Since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet.

If you are going to be a fully devoted follower of Christ, you will have to think, do and live like Jesus thought, did and lived—not the least of which is to take on the attitude, exhibit the actions, and live the lifestyle of a servant. Yes—you will have to serve as Jesus served!

Serving is what Jesus did because servanthood was at the very core of who Jesus was and why Jesus came. The Gospel of Mark, the first written biographical account of Jesus, sums up the life and ministry of Jesus with this simple, clear and compelling mission statement:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

Fleshing out this mission statement, John 13 presents the servanthood of Jesus in action in the most unusual and unforgettable way: He washed His disciples' feet. Then, as He completed this humbling task, He said to them, "I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." (John 13:15)

It is abundantly clear from this passage, along with other scripture, that serving is an unmistakable, unavoidable demand of discipleship. Not only is serving a demand, but when we look at Jesus' example, we find that serving is also a delight. It is what makes us bless-able: "Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them." (John 13:17)

Think about it: Serving like Jesus is what puts you at your Christ-like best!

You are called to serve! Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-7, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God took on the very nature of a servant." Galatians 5:13 says, "Serve one another in love." If you are serving, you are fulfilling your basic Christian calling. If you are not, then you are not!

You were created to serve! Like a fish swims and a bird flies, a Christian serves. Ephesians 2:10 states, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Before you were even conceived, God laid out specific plans just for you. You are not an after-thought; you do not just exist; you are on this earth not just to be a potted plant, you were born not just to consume, but to contribute. God deliberately shaped you to serve His purposes, which means that He has placed an important responsibility on your shoulders that only you can fulfill.

You contribute to the Body of Christ when you serve! God specifically created you, converted you, and called you to contribute to the life, health and mission of a local church. Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 12:27, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Verse 12 says, “The body is a unit, though it’s made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.” Verse 18 says, “God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.” Why? Verse 7 tells us it is, “for the common good.” 1 Peter 4:10 says, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” Perhaps you didn’t realize this, but you serving in your church is the primary means of other people receiving God’s grace.

You capture the world’s attention when you serve! Our humble, authentic acts of service put God in a good light. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, “Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”(Matthew 5:16) Jesus said in John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples: That you have love for one another.” It’s by authentic servanthood that you become living proof of a loving God.

Jesus ended the washing of His disciples’ feet by issuing this very simple challenge: “Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.” (John 13:17) It doesn’t get any clearer than that!

I have one simple question for you: Where are you serving?

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I want to obey You in all things. Help me. I want that to be the essential characteristic of my life.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What is your biggest takeaway from the devotional today?**
- Looking at the scriptures in this teaching, how were you created to serve?**
- Where can you serve someone “like Jesus” today to be at your Christ-like best?**

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DAY 2

GIVE TO GET, STOOP TO RISE, DIE TO LIVE

The Logic Of The Upside Down Kingdom

The Big Idea: It's absolutely amazing that when God became human in Christ that He wasn't born to royalty in a palace to the celebrations of the adoring throngs. In fact, it was just the opposite: He was born in a barn to a teenage mother in an obscure village that was nothing more than a wide spot in the road, to no fanfare whatsoever. Then, as you study the life of this Christ in the Gospels, and as writers of the New Testament translate His life into our Christian theology, you are driven to the conclusion that humility, servanthood and sacrifice were not just values Jesus suddenly embraced when He became man just to impress people. These were pre-eternal convictions fundamental to the essence of God's being. As Jesus generously embodied these very things, through Him you were seeing who God was—and is—in living color. And that, dear believer, is your fundamental duty: To be undeniable proof of an unpretentious Lord.

Read Mark 9:35

Jesus sat down, called the twelve disciples over to Him, and said, "Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else."

Here is yet another example of the upside logic of the Kingdom of God. We get that a lot from Jesus: To live, you've got to die; to get, you've got to give; to receive honor, you must be willing to be humble; to be rich, you've got to give it all away; to be first, you've got to be okay with last place; to be great, you've got to be the servant of all.

Though from the world's point of view this is totally upside down, it's totally normal from heaven's perspective. When you really think about these kinds of counterintuitive statements, you realize they were the values that Jesus deeply held and, in fact, were driving convictions He lived out in actions every single day.

Furthermore, as you study the life of Jesus in the Gospels as well as the theology of entire New Testament, you will come to the conclusion that these were not just values Jesus suddenly embraced when He became man just to impress people, these were pre-eternal values fundamental to the essence of God's being. As Jesus lived out humility, generosity, servanthood, and sacrifice, you were seeing who God is in living color. Therefore, as Francis Quarles points out, "The voice of humility is God's music, and the silence of humility is God's rhetoric."

When we invite Jesus to become the Savior and Lord of our lives and embrace the values of God's Kingdom as our own, these then become the fundamental attributes of who we are and the defining characteristics of how we go about the business of the Kingdom. Or so it should! If we have had an authentic salvation experience, then humility will be evident to others who are

watching our lives. Generosity will characterize our practices with money and possessions. We will eschew pushing and clawing our way to the top and serve our way into greatness. And in a way that authenticates the totality of our claim to Christian faith, we willingly lay down our lives for others—not only in dying, but, in what is much more demanding sacrificial living.

That is the kind of greatness that endures—greatness in the eyes of God.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, examine my attitudes and practices in light of the eternal values of heaven. Where You find misalignment in my life—with my money and possessions, in my desire for recognition and position, as I use power and pleasure, please make me more Christ-like.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What are some of the “upside-down” Kingdom logic examples in this teaching that stand out to you?
- What is the kind of greatness that endures in the eyes of God?
- How is living with a humility like Jesus lived a selfless act?

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DAY 3

THEY ALSO SERVE WHO LEAD

Jesus Demonstrated Greatness In Stooping To Serve

The Big Idea: Oswald Chambers said, “True greatness, true leadership, is achieved not by reducing [people] to one’s service, but by giving up oneself in selfless service to them.” Our greatest leadership is whenever we practice authentic servant-leadership. Our greatest influence is whenever we serve from a Christ-centered heart of love. Our most bless-able life before God is whenever we humble ourselves in selfless service to those God has placed within our reach.

Read Matthew 23:11-12

The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Oswald Chambers said, “True greatness, true leadership, is achieved not by reducing [people] to one’s service, but by giving up oneself in selfless service to them.”

If that be true, then our greatest leadership is wherever we practice authentic servant-leadership. Our greatest influence occurs when we serve from a Christ-centered heart of love. And we are most bless-able before God when we humble ourselves in selfless service to those God has placed within our reach.

Do you want to be a great leader, have influence over people’s lives and be positioned for Divine favor? Develop your servant-leader quotient. The late Dr. Earnest J. Campbell, Senior Minister at the historic Riverside Church in New York City from 1968-1976, gave a powerful commencement address at Princeton Seminary in 1978, and the title of his message was, “They Also Serve Who Lead.”

That title is a sermon in itself. In his address, Campbell gave some characteristics of servant leaders that I have found personally challenging—and definitely worth emulating. Give some thought to these as you think about your own call to servanthood and influence:

- The servant-leader is willing to assume whatever role necessary.
- The servant-leader understands that there is no job beneath his dignity.
- The servant-leader is willing to pay whatever price for stability, peace, and health [in his home, business or church].
- The servant-leader measures his success not in how submissive people are to him, but in how much they respond to his Christ-like example.

- The servant-leader takes responsibility for and watches closely the spiritual, emotional, financial and physical well-being of those in his care.
- The servant-leader is never too busy or too important for interruptions to meet whatever need people may have at the moment.
- The servant-leader is quick to forgive, slow to judge.
- The servant-leader is ridiculously generous.
- The servant-leader is willing to pay a high price, whatever the cost, to obey God.
- The servant-leader willingly puts their life on the line for God, their family, and their people.

Something to really think about, isn't it?

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, make me like Your Son. He was servant of all. Make me a servant, too.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **Can you think of a time when one of your leaders served you? How did this make you feel?**
- **What kind of attitude does it take to be a real servant of others?**
- **Where do you think God is calling you to serve today in a way that will lead someone else closer to God?**

DAY 4

THE SACRED DUTY OF SERVING BEHIND THE SCENES

Just Be Faithful, Your Day Is Coming

The Big Idea: It's unlikely that you will ever hear a sermon where the long lists of names in the Bible are given any mention, but don't forget that by their inclusion in scripture they have been given their props in God's eternal record. Furthermore, they have been listed for us to remind us that it takes a team to do the work of the Kingdom. For sure, there are leading characters on the Kingdom team, but it's still a team, mostly of unnamed, unsung heroes who are typically forgotten—except by God. God never forgets. He appreciates the contributions of each and every one—even the lesser lights. And He has stored up indescribable recognition and reward for them in the Kingdom to come.

Read 1 Chronicles 26:6-8, 12-13

Obed-edom's son Shemaiah had sons with great ability who earned positions of great authority in the clan. Their names were Othni, Rephael, Obed, and Elzabad. Their relatives, Elihu and Semakiah, were also very capable men. All of these descendants of Obed-edom, including their sons and grandsons—sixty-two of them in all—were very capable men, well qualified for their work. ... These divisions of the gatekeepers were named for their family leaders, and like the other Levites, they served at the house of the Lord. They were assigned by families for guard duty at the various gates, without regard to age or training, for it was all decided by means of sacred lots.

So just who was Obed-Edom, and Othni, Rephael, Obed, and Elzabad, and the other sixty-two of their clan? We don't really know, except that they were gatekeepers in the house of the Lord—the “tent” that King David set up in Jerusalem to centralize Israel's worship of Almighty God.

We don't know much about Obed-Edom or any of the other people the chronicler names in this chapter. And this isn't the first time he has treated us to such a list. He is famous for that, which is why his book is called Chronicles. But why force us to read all these mostly meaningless names?

Simply this: Both the chronicler and King David, who supplied these names, knew very well that the work of administrating the country and running the house of God, couldn't have done without the help of a lot of loyal and skilled people. If David were accepting an Oscar, he would be up there for thirty minutes listing off all the people he would like to thank—these names and many others mentioned in this book.

It is highly likely that you will never hear a sermon or attend a Bible study where these names are given any mention, but don't forget that they have been given their props in the eternal Word of God. My point is, it takes a team to do the work of the Kingdom. For sure, there are leading characters on the Kingdom team, but it's still a team, mostly of unnamed, unsung heroes who are typically forgotten—except by God.

God never forgets. He appreciates the contributions of each and every one—even the lesser lights. And He has stored up indescribable recognition and reward for them in the Kingdom to come. And the chronicler's mention of them here is an important reminder to us of their contribution to their efforts and of their value to God.

Maybe you are one of those unnamed, unsung heroes who goes unnoticed by everyone else, but your faithfulness is noticed by God. Perhaps you are an Obed-Edom, or Othni, Rephael, Obed, and Elzabad, or even one the other sixty-two of their clan who didn't even get their name in the movie credits that roll on the film long after the audience has left the theater, and you wonder if you really matter. My response to you is, "Yes, you matter. We wouldn't be effective in building God's Kingdom without you! It takes a team—and no matter what you do, you are an integral part of that team!"

But more important than my acknowledgment is God's. He has written your name in a book, too—one that's even better than 1 Chronicles. It's the Book of Life. And God Himself will celebrate your name all eternity long. How's that for recognition?

So just be faithful doing what you're doing. Your day is coming!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I thank You for all of the unsung heroes who have quietly but faithfully built Your Kingdom throughout my life. Many of them are now gone, and have mostly been forgotten on this planet, but they are not forgotten by You. They have joined the unending list of others long gone but not forgotten by You. They are the spiritual fathers and mothers of others who now serve in Your eternal Kingdom quietly but faithfully. Father, bless each one. Wrap Your arms around them and remind them again that You noticed. And say 'thank you' for me.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **If you were accepting an Oscar for your life, what unsung heroes would you list off in your "thank you's?" (Take some time to thank God for these people right now and pray for them.)**
- **Do you find yourself motivated to serve only when recognition will come your way or are there areas in your life where you serve unnoticed?**

DAY 5

TAKE A BREAK FROM YOU

Just Be Faithful, Your Day Is Coming

The Big Idea: Jesus perfectly modeled authentic humility, so His life has something to teach us about humility. Try practicing humility this week in one of the ways Jesus did: Washing the feet of another, playing with little children, serving the poor, or having a meal with social outcasts.

Read Luke 14:10-11

Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table...For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Since several times in the New Testament we are told to clothe ourselves in humility, here's the question I have for you: If you were clothed in your own humility, would you be scantily clad?

Humility is one of the prominent virtues of Jesus, and therefore, it should be the prominent virtue of His followers. Humility doesn't mean thinking less of yourself than others; nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts, abilities and station in life. It simply means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all. Mike Show said it quite well, "Humility isn't thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less."

William Carey, who lived 200 years ago, was known as the father of the modern missions movement. He was a Baptist missionary to India where he served for forty-one years translating the Scriptures. Not once did he ever return to his home country of England. When Carey took ill with the disease that would eventually take his life, he was asked to select the Scripture that would be shared at his funeral. He replied, "Oh, I feel that such a poor sinful creature is unworthy to have anything said about him; but if a funeral sermon must be preached, let it be from the words, 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.'"

One of the things that made William Carey great was the kind of humility you witness in that statement. That wasn't just a false humility either, for he directed his own gravestone to be engraved with this epitaph:

William Carey
Born, August 17, 1761
Died, June 9, 1834
A wretched, poor, and helpless worm
On Thy kind arms I fall.

To truly enter into that kind of authentic humility, which is the kind that Jesus described, you've got to start thinking less of yourself.

Let me give you a challenge this week: Forget about yourself! Try it. Practice being absent minded when it comes to you. Get you out of your thoughts, and replace them with prayers of blessings and plans for serving other people in your life. Try living every moment of your life for the glory of God alone.

And see what happens. I suspect that if you allow the Lord to change your attitude, the simple joy of just belonging to Him will be the result.

Jesus perfectly modeled authentic humility, so His life has something to teach us about humility. Try practicing humility this week in one of the ways Jesus did: Washing the feet of another, playing with little children, serving the poor, or having a meal with social outcasts.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

I am nothing without You. I can do nothing apart from You. I have no hope, no life, no future except through You. You are my all in all, so to You alone I cling.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Can you think of a time when you have been humbled? Write/discuss about this.
- “Humility isn’t thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.” What do you think about this statement? Is it freeing for you?
- Today, try to commit to the exercise outlined at the end of this devotional. Take note of what happens within you and around you as you practice “forgetting about yourself.”

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WEEK

5

EXPERIENCE ENCOURAGEMENT

DAY 1

GOD'S WILL AND YOUR COURAGE

God Encourages Us To Be Courageous

The Big Idea: Fear is an ever-present enemy that is constantly yammering in your ear that you will lose, you will get hurt, you will fail, and you will die if you take that step of faith. Fear is telling you to shrink back, play it safe, and stay in your comfort zone. Yet God has pre-determined victory for His people, and that includes you. So whom are you going to believe—Fear or God? The answer to that will determine whether you will achieve victory over the enemies in your life and attain the promises that God has made to you, or if you will shrink back into a life of mediocrity.

Read 1 Chronicles 19:13

*Be courageous! Let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God.
May the Lord's will be done.*

If we are truly committed to the will of the Lord being done, then the only thing left to do is to show courage and move forward with resolution. But that is not something we have to conjure up on our own, God Himself offers His encouragement to us that we be courageous.

Just show courage—that was Joab's philosophy in leading the Israelite troops against two formidable armies that had ganged up on Israel. The Arameans and the Ammonites presented a sizable danger to Israel, and they were desperate: they knew of David's growing military dominance and they didn't want to be yet two more of his many vassal nations. So they came to fight; they threw all they had at Israel in a do-or-die effort.

So when Joab realized their divide and conquer strategy—they would split the forces and attack Israel from the front and from the rear—he repurposed part of his troops under the capable leadership of his brother Abishai while he led the other part. He met their strategy with his own, along with this bold faith declaration calling for courageous leadership; and at the end of the day, his troops routed their enemy while securing the promise of God for a prosperous Israel.

But it wasn't just a great strategy that won the day for Israel. That was a significant part to the victory. It wasn't just well-trained troops, previous experience and the skillful leadership of Joab and Abishai. Those were important pieces to the story as well. What won the day for God's people was God's will. God had willed that Israel would prosper, and because Joab was convinced of the will of God, he was able to marshal his strategic thinking, military experience and well-trained troops to win the day. Since he knew in his "knower" that God's will was to give him victory, the only thing left for the general to do at this point was to demonstrate courageous leadership and move his troops resolutely into battle.

Think about that in terms of your own life. If you are truly convinced of God's good will for you, as you say you are, then the only thing left for you to do is to act courageously. If you resist steps of faith in response to God's will, then you really don't trust that God will perform His purposes.

Now I am not mocking your lack of faith or belittling you because of fear. Fear and emotional paralysis are natural emotions that attack our resolve every step of the way. That is why "do not fear" and "be bold and courageous" are the number one commands given to us in scripture. Fear is an ever-present enemy that we must overcome at each step where faith is required of us.

Fear is an ever-present enemy that is constantly yammering in your ear that you will lose, you will get hurt, you will fail, and you will die if you take that step of faith. Fear is telling you to shrink back, play it safe, and stay in your comfort zone. Yet God has pre-determined victory for His people, and that includes you.

So whom are you going to believe: Fear or God? The answer to that will determine whether you will achieve victory over the enemies in your life and attain the promises that God has made to you, or if you will shrink back into a life of mediocrity.

My friend, the will of God shall be accomplished. So my encouragement to you is to step out courageously and resolutely into the victory that the Lord has predetermined to give you.

Perhaps a good idea for you today, if you want to take God's encouragement to heart and live as a courageous person, would be to memorize Joshua 1:9, "This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Claim that promise for today, and then act on it!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I want to take Your encouragement to heart today and live as a courageous person. And with Your help, I will. Fill me with Your encouragement and supernatural courage.



DAILY RESPONSE

- ⦿ **Has fear ever stopped you from doing something? Discuss/journal about this.**
- ⦿ **Does knowing that God has a faith plan for you and not a fear plan put courage into you?**
- ⦿ **What simple prayer do you need to pray today about courage to overcome your fears?**

Handwriting practice area consisting of 25 horizontal dotted lines.

DAY 2

THE UNEQUALED POWER OF ENCOURAGEMENT

A Positive Impact In Life Will Be In Proportion To The Encouraging Words You Speak

The Big Idea: One of the chief reasons we stumble into sin, surrender to a spirit of fear, slip into emotional depletion, become spiritually hardened and shrink back from reaching our faith-potential is from discouragement—or perhaps more accurately, the lack of encouragement. As Believers, we not only have the spiritual responsibility, we have the awesome potential for making a huge impact in the lives of others by simply living out the Biblical injunction to encourage one another daily.

Read Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

There is nothing quite so powerful as an encouraging person! I love to be around them, and I'll bet you do, too. They even find ways to have difficult conversations that leave you feeling valued and hopeful. They are life-giving. They are a gift. May their tribe increase.

On the other hand, we all know people who seem to find fault in just about anything. They look on the dark side of everything and infect anyone who is near them with their negativity. And if we're not careful, we can get pulled into their black hole of negativity, fault-finding and discouragement.

That's why the writer of Hebrews gave us these two powerful admonitions:

We should keep on encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things. Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord's coming is getting closer. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. (Hebrews 3:13)

One of the chief reasons we stumble into sin, surrender to a spirit of fear, slip into emotional depletion, become spiritually hardened and shrink back from reaching our faith-potential is from discouragement—or perhaps more accurately, the lack of encouragement. As believers, we not

only have the spiritual responsibility, we have the awesome potential for making a huge impact in the lives of others by simply living out the Biblical injunction to encourage one another daily.

This is especially important since the Enemy of our souls works overtime in his attempt to discourage, diminish and destroy us. But good, old fashioned, Christ-hearted encouragement is arguably the most powerful force for good we can unleash on one another. Just consider the power of encouragement in the following verses:

“The mouth of the righteous is a tree of life...” (Proverbs 10:11)

“The tongue of the wise brings healing...” (Proverbs 12:18)

“An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.” (Proverbs 12:25)

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue...” (Proverbs 18:21)

Wow—that is the amazing, life-changing potential in the words you can choose to deliver today. So why not try it! Let me suggest five different approaches you can take to unleash this power upon another:

One, through verbal compliments: Try showering someone with praise for something they have done.

Two, through inspiring words: Speak affirming words to someone because of who they are, the beauty and potential of their character.

Three, through acts of kindness: Encourage someone simply by doing something nice for them, when they least expect it, or maybe even don't deserve it.

Four, through indirect words: Talk about them behind their back—in a good way. For sure, it will get back to them, and it will be even more powerful coming from a third party.

Five, through written words: Send someone a note of appreciation. It will have the added value of being enjoyed over and over again.

Encouragement—it's the most powerful thing you can add to this world. So let me encourage you to go for it today!

In light of that, write a word of encouragement and send it to someone whom God prompts you to bless. Or, before the week is out, use an indirect word of encouragement by telling a third party how much you love, appreciate a mutual acquaintance. It's kind of like holy gossiping, and when that person hears how you have said uplifting things about them, it will make their day, or week or year. Why do I say that? Because, as William James pointed out, “Possibly the deepest human need is the need to feel appreciated.”

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, use me today to encourage someone who truly needs to be uplifted. I pray that the words I speak will make their day, that it will inspire courage within them, and that they will receive my words in a way that actually draws them to You.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Think of a time someone encouraged you and it changed your day...or maybe your life. Write this down so you remember it.
- Why is an encouraging word so important to us and how often do we need it / should be giving it out?
- How does encouragement keep us from sin?
- Who can you encourage today...now go do it!

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DAY 3

HOW TO TRANSFORM YOUR CHILDREN

Never Underestimate The Encouragement Of Your Parental Blessing

The Big Idea: God has engineered every child with the seeds of success—and it's a parent's duty to see and prophetically speak that potential into the child's spirit. Much of what a child needs to reach their potential is an adult who understands God's thumbprint for them and helps the child understand what that means by picturing it for them. As Larry Crabb said, "A vision we give to others of who and what they could become has power when it echoes what the Spirit has already spoken into their souls."

Read Genesis 48:14-16

Jacob put his right hand on the head of Ephraim, though he was the younger boy, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, though he was the firstborn. Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before Whom my grandfather Abraham and my father, Isaac, walked—the God Who has been my shepherd all my life, to this very day, the Angel Who has redeemed me from all harm—may He bless these boys. May they preserve my name and the names of Abraham and Isaac. And may their descendants multiply greatly throughout the earth."

If you looked up the words "dysfunction" in the Bible, you would find a footnote that said, "See Jacob's family." They brought disharmony, envy, rivalry, promiscuity, violence, estrangement to new heights—and that was on a good day. But over time, through some tough lessons, by making some strategic changes, and with God's help, they turned a corner toward becoming a family of destiny.

Ultimately, God shaped this family into a nation—Israel, his covenant people. From Israel came law of Moses, Levitical priesthood, the Davidic kingdom, the Messiah—Jesus Christ, and the Judeo-Christian heritage upon which American society was built. And we see how they began to turn that corner here in Genesis 48.

Jacob, now an old man, does something for his children and grandchildren that every child wants and needs: He gave them "the blessing." What do I mean by "the blessing"? Throughout the Bible, patriarchs of families and fathers would pass on "the blessing" to their children. It was a formal cultural occasion and a significant spiritual marker in the life of that child that shaped the rest of their life, even if it was an adult child when they received it. The father's blessing would affirm the child's value and give prophetic direction to their future...an impact that would last for generations.

We don't do that much in our culture, but in truth, every human being longs for both approval and prophetic guidance from their parents. Missing out on it leads us on a lifetime search for it

in other ways...most of which are non-productive at best, and are destructive at worst.

How? How do you give them the blessing? Here's what Jacob did—three things:

First, you bless them by giving them meaningful touch. That is not easy in a culture that's uneasy with physical contact...even in caring homes where parents, especially dads, tend to quit touching their kids once they reach grade-school. But notice what Jacob did in verse 10: "So Joseph brought his sons close to Jacob, and his father kissed them and embraced them." Then, between verses 10-14, eight times there's a reference to Jacob physically touching these two boys.

Throughout the Bible, "the blessing" was always accompanied by a meaningful touch. Jesus did this when he took the children in his arms and blessed them. God created us with five million touch receptors, and over 1/3 are in our hands. Jesus understood that touch communicates something powerful—that we're loved and valued. It provides comfort, security, and acceptance.

Second, speak words of encouragement to them. Genesis 48:15 says, "Jacob blessed them and said, 'May God, may He bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth.'"

There's tremendous power in our words! Goethe's words are profound: "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to be what they are capable of becoming. Mark Twain once said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." They likely didn't realize they were doing it, but both Goethe and Twain were simply echoing what the Bible teaches:

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue..." (Proverbs 18:21)

Words of affirmation are powerful communicators of love, acceptance and appreciation. Without them, kids often grow up looking for it in ways that are unhealthy. But not only does withholding encouraging words hurt, we do even more damage by the negative words we use. Rather than shaping positively, critical, angry, negative words shatter emotionally.

Someone has said that it takes 40 positive affirmations to overcome just one word spoken in a hurtful way. We need to be keenly aware of how powerful our words are, and how powerful the absence of words of blessing can be. The people in your life, especially your children, need to regularly hear words that bless them.

Paul said it this way in Ephesians 4:29, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up, according to their need, that it may benefit those who listen." You can set the stage for a household of destiny by learning to bless with meaningful touch and encouraging words.

Third, envision a special future for them. You give "the blessing" by helping them to picture an amazing future. We see Jacob doing this in Genesis 48:16,19, "They will be called by the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac and may they greatly increase upon the earth"...manasseh also

will develop into a people, and he also will be great. But Ephraim will be even greater and his descendants will enrich nations.” (MSG)

God has engineered every child with the seeds of success—and it’s a parent’s duty to see and prophetically speak that potential into the child’s spirit. Much of what a child needs to reach their potential is an adult who understands God’s thumbprint for them and helps the child understand what that means by picturing it for them. Larry Crabb said, “A vision we give to others of who and what they could become has power when it echoes what the Spirit has already spoken into their souls.”

One of the ways you can envision a special future is through word pictures that express high value. Notice Genesis 48:20: “Israel,” he is referring to a time in the future when the nation of Israel, “will use your names to give blessings: May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.”

A word-picture expresses a child’s God-given worth in a creative and unforgettable way—and often becomes the prophetic momentum for them to become that vision. Do that for your child. Find a common object, one that they value, and use it to paint a word picture of their special value and their special, future. Discern God’s thumbprint for their life, and prophetically speak that into their spirit and you’ll provide them with a self-renewing blessing. Touch and encourage your kids, and paint for them a picture of a special future—that’s the blessing.

And what a gift that is!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, use me today to touch, encourage and envision a future of promise for those within my sphere of influence, especially a child or grandchild.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Try to think of a few ways you were encouraged as a child. What impact did these encouragements have on your life?
- If you are a parent, what is God speaking to you right now about how you can encourage your children? If you are not a parent, is there a young person you can encourage this week?
- Take time to pray today over the young people in your life that need encouragement. What blessing can you speak over them regularly?

Handwriting practice area consisting of 25 horizontal dotted lines.

DAY 4

MAN'S LAST CHOICE IS OFTEN GOD'S FIRST CHOICE

Encouragement for Anybody Who Was Picked Last

The Big Idea: If it seems like God has no big plans for you, don't let your station in life fool you. God is no respecter of persons and He is not swayed by negative circumstances. He will accomplish His purposes—and that includes some very good things for you. Others may see you as the last choice for the team, but God may very well select you as the first choice for his starting lineup. Just be patient—and ready—and watch what God will do over the course of your life.

Read 1 Chronicles 2:13-15

Jesse's first son was Eliab, his second was Abinadab, his third was Shimea, his fourth was Nethanel, his fifth was Raddai, his sixth was Ozem, and his seventh was David.

Welcome, to the genealogies today! Just promise me that you will hang in there and not skip over or read this chapter with your mind in neutral, because I promise you, in between the lines of what seems like an endless list of names are nuggets of eternal encouragements for you.

So what wonderful spiritual application is in this genealogical account of the tribe of Judah here in 1 Chronicles 2? Well, for starters, remember who comes from this tribe: King David, the most famous and loved king in Israel's history. But even better, from this flawed line (yes, there is quite a bit of drama, and even sin, that produces some of the children born into Judah's lineage) comes the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Jesus the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world.

Now in those two facts alone is enough encouraging material to keep us full of gratitude to God for days to come. Take David for instance. He was God's choice to replace King Saul as the new monarch of Israel. Saul started with such promise, but quickly went off the rails by abandoning his singular trust in God to provide for his success. So God rejected Saul and selected David, of whom he later says, "I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do." (Acts 13:32)

But David was not the people's first choice to be king. We read in the selected text that he was the seventh son of Jesse, and basically his father's afterthought for kingly consideration. You remember the story: The prophet Samuel came to Bethlehem under the Lord's direction to anoint one of Jesse's sons to be the next king. And from the oldest to the youngest, six brothers, from the oldest to the youngest, were paraded in front of the grizzled old prophet, who one by one, exclaimed, "Nope, not that one! Next."

In fact, David wasn't even present for the lineup. After all six brothers had been examined, and rejected, Samuel had to ask if there were any other sons. He knew that God had told him to anoint one of Jesse's sons, but none of the six fit the prophet's qualifications. That is when—reluctantly, it seems—the family admitted there was one other, but Samuel shouldn't bother with that one. He was just a no account brother out shepherding the family flocks. Yet when he was finally brought in, the prophet jumped to his feet and shouted, "That is the one!"

What a reminder to you and me that what man discounts as no account is often what God counts as perfect for His plan. It doesn't matter if you are the seventh choice—seven in scripture has a sense of finality, which in this case implies the last choice—God can make you His first choice. So as it relates to your life, keep your heart pure before God and your hope to play a grand purpose in His plan intact, because God will elevate you if and when He chooses. That is up to Him, but just remember, your station in life has nothing to do with God's willingness to use you.

One other thing about this lineage of Judah: Jesus was born into it way down the road, but it was a flawed heritage full of prostitution, adultery, intrigue and murder. Not only can God use the least likely of man's choice, He can use people who come from highly disadvantaged and dysfunction at background. And not just squeeze them into His divine lineup, God can make them superstars on His team. From the flawed seed of Judah came many amazing kings and one Messiah of the world.

All that to say, if it seems like God has no big plans for you, don't let your station in life fool you. God is no respecter of persons and He is not swayed by negative circumstances. He will accomplish His purposes—and that includes some very good things for you.

So if you are frustrated with who you are and where you are in life, take it to Jesus. Put your negative circumstances, your flawed heritage, and your limited personality in His hands, and as you patiently trust and obey Him, watch what He will do over the course of your life.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, thank You that You have chosen me, adopted me and accepted me as Your dearly loved child. While others may not see or appreciate the inherent value possess by virtue of the fact that You created me, I chose to believe what You think and say of me: That I am Your workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works that You have prepared in advance for me to do.

DAILY RESPONSE

- Have you ever been chosen last for a game with friends? How did this feel?**
- How does it feel to know that God will never leave you out if you put your trust in Him?**

DAY 5

THE ART OF SELF-ENCOURAGEMENT

Find Strength in the Lord

The Big Idea: If you are in a jam and no one is around to encourage you, strengthen yourself in the Lord. Assess your situation, ask God for wisdom and strength, be obedience in the ordinary requirements of the day, and express gratitude. That is called trust, and it catalyzes the strength of the Lord.

Read 1 Samuel 30:3-6

When David and his men reached Ziklag, they found it destroyed by fire and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. So David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep. David's two wives had been captured—Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal of Carmel. David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God.

David found out something about human nature, if he didn't know it before this: The very men who flocked to his leadership now were ready to stone him when the tide was turned against them. Not everyone who loves you and follows your leadership will love you and follow your leadership when times get tough and sacrifice is required. Not everyone will stand loyally by your side when you make a mistake, especially if the mistake personally affects them.

When David's small army went off on a raid, their camp was attacked and destroyed, and worse, their families had been carried off as captives. The men would have expected that their wives and children would be treated in the most brutal fashion. Understandably, David's men were emotional.

What was David's response to this desperate situation? He went to God. What did he do with God to get his strength? Who knows for sure, but he would have poured out his heart to God. Probably he recounted God's call and His promises to David that he would rule over the people of Israel. Perhaps he recounted the many times God had delivered him, thus reminding himself of God's unfailing love. Whatever David did with God, he was able to find strength in the Lord his God.

What a contrast to David's response when he first moved to Ziklag (the scene of the Amalekite raid and the sources of David's men's misery). We are told in the text that he moved there because, "David kept thinking to himself..." that Saul would eventually find him and kill him. (1 Samuel 27:1). Once again, he is in a tight squeeze, but this time he goes to God.

Even godly leaders can fall into the trap of humanistic thinking, or they can strengthen themselves in the Lord. In life and in leadership, that is a skill we need to develop. When the chips are down, and others are not there to lift us up, we must find ways to strengthen ourselves in the Lord. In his book, “Keep in Step with the Spirit,” theologian J.I. Packer gives a step-by-step guide for this very thing:

First, as one who wants to do all the good you can, you observe what tasks, opportunities, and responsibilities face you.

Second, you pray for help in these, acknowledging that without Christ you can do nothing—nothing fruitful, that is (John 15:5).

Third, you go to work with a good will and a high heart, expecting to be helped as you asked to be. Fourth, you thank God for help given, ask pardon for your own failures en route, and request more help for the next task...holiness is hard working holiness, based on endless repetitions of this sequence.

Assess, pray, obey, thank—then trust that God is at work in your difficult circumstances, because He is. John Newton said, “Faith upholds a Christian under all trials, by assuring him that every painful dispensation is under the direction of his Lord; that chastisements are a token of His love; that the season, measure, and continuance of his sufferings, are appointed by Infinite Wisdom, and designed to work for his everlasting good; and that grace and strength shall be afforded him, according to his need.”

How do you strengthen yourself in the Lord? The bottom line is that you offer old fashioned trust in the One Who works things out for His glory and your good.

D.L. Moody said, “When a person has no strength, if they lean on God, they become powerful.”

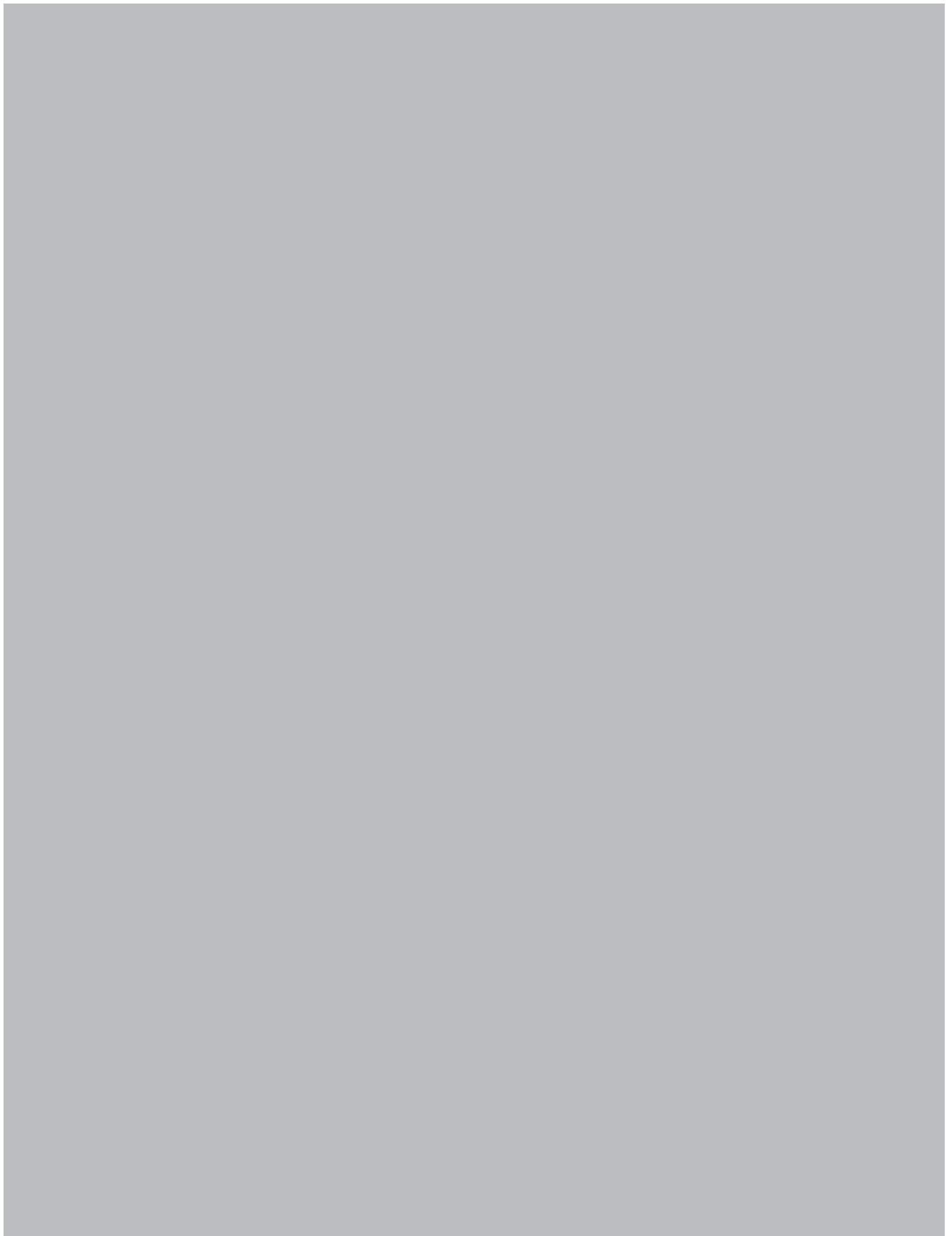
A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, today I lean on You. I have no strength, but You have all the strength I need, and then some. And not only today, but from this time forth, I will find my strength and encouragement in You.



DAILY RESPONSE

- ⦿ **What stands out to you about how David encouraged himself in this bible story?**
- ⦿ **After reading this devotional and the scriptures within it, how do you think you can strengthen yourself in the Lord today?**
- ⦿ **Where do you need encouragement this week? Write it down, commit it to God in prayer and discuss it with your community group.**





WEEK

6

EXPERIENCE FAITH

DAY 1

INCREDIBLE FAITH NEEDS IMPOSSIBLE ODDS

Never Fear The Edge Of Impossibility

The Big Idea: When we follow the voice of God, the steps of faith we are required to take will bring us to the edge of impossible chasms from time to time. Why? Simply because it is there that ruthless trust is developed, and there is nothing more precious to God than our trust. Impossible odds force us to lean into a God Whose power is unlimited, Whose wisdom is unfathomable, and Whose love is unstoppable.

Read Genesis 14:19-20

Melchizedek blessed Abram with this blessing: “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, Who has defeated your enemies for you.” Then Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the goods he had recovered.

Impossible odds! When we follow the voice of God, the steps of faith we are required to take will bring us to the edge of impossible chasms from time to time.

Why does God allow this? Is it because He is incompetent, uncaring or unaware? Not at all! For one thing, nothing is too hard for the Lord—ever. (Genesis 18:14, Jeremiah 32:17). There is no chasm too wide, no problem too hard, no odds too great. He is God, after all. And for another thing, God is committed to developing our trust. How else will trust develop than through our coming face to face with our own limitations, only to see time and again that we belong to a God Whose power is unlimited, Whose wisdom is unfathomable, and Whose love is unstoppable.

There is nothing more precious to God than our trust, and He is committed to developing it in us. As Brennan Manning said, “The splendor of a human heart which trusts that it is loved gives God more pleasure than Westminster Cathedral, the Sistine Chapel, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Van Gogh’s ‘Sunflowers,’ the sight of ten thousand butterflies in flight, or the scent of a million orchids in bloom. Trust is our gift back to God, and he finds it so enchanting that Jesus died for love of it.”

Abraham, as primitive a man as we might think him to be, was quite sophisticated in his theology—he recognized early on the trustworthiness of the God Who was leading him into seemingly impossible challenges. So did the priest of Salam, Melchizedek, who came out to bless Abraham after his stunning victory. Both the victor and the priest recognized that the blessing of the incredible win against overwhelming odds—Abraham’s 318 men against 5 kings of city-states, led by one whose reign had dominated the regions for years—had come about only because it was God Most High Who had defeated these enemies.

That indeed, was the blessing of the Most High. (Genesis 14:19-20) Abraham chose to recognize the true reason for the success, thereby setting an eternal pattern, by giving a tithe (one-tenth) of all he had gained in battle to the priest, who was a representative of God. (Genesis 14:18) So committed to honoring God and refusing to make himself famous (compare Genesis 11:4 with Genesis 12:1-2), Abraham even refused to take a payment from the defeated kings who had benefited from Abraham's victory of the dominant kings who had subjected them for years. Abraham let it be known then, and for all time, that here was no human reason for his success; in truth, his success came from God, and God alone.

The point being that when you follow God, your faith will take you to what is, from the human perspective, a place of impossible odds. But God has wisely and lovingly led you there to solidify in your faith that the Most High you follow is the God of the impossible.

God wants your trust. And there is only one way to get it! Keep that in mind the next time you are facing impossible odds.

What is your impossibility today? Identify it, then offer a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord for the opportunity to go deeper in your faith. And when you have come out the other side victorious, don't forget to honor God in a tangible way. What way? Abraham has set a pattern for you!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I am facing an impossibility in my life today. Thank You for the opportunity to go deeper in my faith—to offer You ruthless trust. Thank You for being my competent and caring Father. Thank You in advance for what You are going to do. Thank You for giving me yet another chance to honor You by stepping out in risky faith. In Jesus' name, amen.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Why do you think God allows us to have our backs against the wall at times?
- Do you find it easy to trust God or difficult? Why is this?
- What examples in scripture inspire you to trust in God?
- What impossibility do you need to offer to God in prayer today?

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DAY 2

FAITH SEES FARTHER

Dare Great Things For God

The Big Idea: William Newton Clark said, “Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see!” As believers in Jesus, you and I are in the mountain-moving business, and our currency is faith. If what we are doing doesn’t involve faith—if we can do it ourselves without a desperate need of God—then we are not doing the Lord’s business. But with faith we are, and with it, nothing is impossible.

Read Joshua 14:10-13

Then Caleb said to Joshua, “Now then, just as the Lord promised, He has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time He said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as He said.” Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance.

Are you daring great things for God? Whether or not you are is your choice, but I say “why not?” You and I have only one life to live, and it will be over soon enough, so let’s try something daring for God. Why not do something that will make a difference in someone’s life one hundred years from now? How about we try something that will leave them talking about us long after we are gone? Yes, let’s attempt something that will be celebrated by saints and angels alike for all eternity! Why not at least try?

That is the story of faith in the Bible. Read Hebrews 11 and you will see that God’s Great Hall of Faith is made up of men and women no different than you and me who stepped out and attempted the impossible for the sake of the Kingdom. Now some of them were successful and some of them were not, by the world’s standards anyway, but it was the faith that led them to try that got them eternally noticed in Hebrews 11.

Caleb was one of those kinds of people. He was in his mid-eighties when he informed Joshua that he was ready to take on a certain warrior-like and historically large—and I mean physically big and imposing (see Deuteronomy 2:10, 21; 9:2)—segment of the Canaanites in the well fortified hill country surrounding Hebron. “Give me this mountain,” Caleb said to Joshua as the land was being allotted to the tribes, and that has forever become the war cry of unlikely men and woman whose faith sees farther than the eye sees and whose spirit dares to attempt impossible things for God.

I love what William Newton Clark said, “Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see!” As believers in Jesus, you and I are in the mountain moving business, and our currency is faith. If what we are doing doesn’t involve faith—if we can do it ourselves without a desperate need of God—then we are not doing the Lord’s business. But with faith, nothing is impossible. Jesus, the Founder and Finisher of our faith, said, “The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a poppy seed, say, you would tell this mountain, ‘Move!’ and it will move. There is nothing you wouldn’t be able to tackle.” (Matthew 17:20)

We have been given faith—more than enough, actually—but are we daring to exercise it? We have in front of us at the present moment “things farther than we can see.” Or at least we should. If we don’t then we need to come before God and ask Him to give us a scary big vision of what could be.

Whatever that vision is, however impossible it might seem, whatever the obstacles that stand between us and it, if it is noble, if it is consistent with God’s Kingdom, if we hunger after it, we must stretch ourselves to reach it, to achieve it. William Carey, missionary to India and considered to be the father of modern missions, said, “Attempt great things for God—expect great things from God.”

That is the story of common men and women who stepped out to where others wouldn’t and in so doing, ended up achieving the uncommon. They didn’t step out thinking they were doing the heroic; they just stepped out thinking God would take care of them. And He did—and by stepping out in faith, they stepped into God’s Great Hall of Faith.

“Give me this mountain,” eighty-five-year-old Caleb boldly demanded. He was the forerunner of many others who would do similar:

Jabez said, “Enlarge my territory!”

David said, “That giant is no big deal!”

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said, “We like it hot!”

Nehemiah said, “Let’s rebuild this wall!”

Esther said, “If I die, I die!”

What are you saying? What are you praying? What is your faith you laying hold? What is the Holy Spirit daring your soul to see that your eyes cannot? Dare great things for God—do great things for God.

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in Me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. You can ask for anything in My name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father. Yes, ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it!” (John 14:12-14) Ask for some big things today!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, give me a willing heart and a bold determination to step out in faith like never before. Help me to truly believe that since You are for me, none can stand against me. Infuse me with Holy Spirit courage to expect great things from You and attempt great things for You. With Your help, today I will offer You risky trust, and let You do the rest.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What do you think of the quote, “Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see!”?
- Would you say you live a life “daring great things for God?” Why or why not?
- Where is God speaking to you today to see farther with faith in your own life?

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DAY 3

WATER-WALKING FAITH

Some Testimonies Only Come By Risky Steps Of Daring Obedience

The Big Idea: Is there an area of faith where you are being tempted to give up because you have come into some unexpected and impossible circumstances? That is the perfect condition, my friend, to exercise water walking faith. So don't give into fear; get out of the boat. Take a step, and keep your focus on Jesus, because yet another heroic faith story is about to be written!

Read Matthew 14:29

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus.

No matter where you go in the Bible, you'll find that memorable stories of faith always involved risky steps of daring obedience. So it is in this story where Peter leaves the other disciples sitting in the relative safety and comfort of their boat, takes a few steps of faith on the water in the middle of a storm, and walks out to meet Jesus, becoming the first person—and only human being that I know of—to literally walk on the water. Peter, a mere mortal, just a common Galilean fisherman, joined Jesus in a very elite club of which there were only two members: The Water Walker Club.

Now this is more than just another one of those incredible Bible stories we read as kids about the superheroes of the faith. This is a story meant to inspire water-walking faith in common, ordinary, garden-variety believers. And within this particular story are several important lessons that Peter's adventure can teach other mere mortals like you and me that we will need to keep in mind when we finally get up the courage to step out of our boat of comfort to take those bold and daring steps of faith to obey God:

First, the wind won't stop blowing just because you take a step of faith. In fact, the storm may pick up a little. The truth is, faith needs a storm to be faith, or it is not faith. But the great thing about storms is that although Jesus doesn't promise to keep you from them, He does promise to be with you in them. And in fact, it is the very resistance of the wind in those storms that provides the lift needed for faith to soar. So take that step of faith into the storm and watch what happens.

Second, when you take your step of faith into the raging storm, you will need to remember the one command that God most often gives His people: "Fear not!" Did you know that there are 366 "fear not's" in the Bible? That is one for every day of the year (including an extra one for leap year). I don't think that number is by mistake—I think God knew that you and I would need to be reminded every single day not to give into fear. Every single day, including today, God is reminding you to choose faith instead, because fear and faith cannot coexist in those who would be water-walkers.

Three, when the storm is raging, your assignment is simply to keep your eyes on Jesus—and just keep walking toward Him. “Don’t give up” is another repeated command in the Bible. To join Peter in the water-walker club, you will have to make the determination to stay focused on the One Who is the Master over the storm—because it is Jesus alone Who will see us through.

Is there an area of faith where you are being tempted to give up because you have come into some unexpected and impossible circumstances? That is the perfect condition, my friend, to exercise water-walking faith. So don’t give into fear and keep your focus on Jesus, because yet another heroic faith story is about to be written!

In the 1950’s, the name Florence Chadwick was synonymous with women’s championship swimming. She was the first woman to swim the English Channel—both ways. In fact, she did it three times, each time going against the tide.

But one of her distance swims was not so successful. She failed to reach her goal, all because she lost sight of it. Florence had set out on July 4, 1952 to swim the 21 miles from Santa Catalina Island to the California mainland. But on this particular morning, the 34-year-old found the water to be numbingly cold, and the fog was so thick she could hardly see the boats in her envoy, which were along side her to scare away the sharks.

As the hours ticked off, she swam on. Fatigue was never a serious problem...it was the bone-chilling coldness of the icy waters that threatened her. Finally, more than fifteen hours after she started, numbed by the cold, Florence asked to be taken out of the water, unable to go on.

Her mother, in a boat beside her, urged her to go on, as did her trainer. They both knew that the mainland had to be close, very close. Yet Florence quit. She got into the boat and fell short of her goal. The boat traveled just short distance until the coastline could be seen. Florence had stopped only a half-mile short of the finish. Upon realizing how close she had come, she dejectedly cried, “If I could have seen the shore I would have made it.”

If you are going to be a faith walker...or a water walker...

Get ready for the storm

Choose faith over fear

Keep your eyes on Jesus

And above all, never give up!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, bless me with water-walking faith. Enlarge my capacity to trust You, even in the storms. Let me be used of You in ways I never thought possible—even walking on some water in the middle of a storm.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Have you ever tried to walk on water...be honest. Seriously though, have you ever stepped out in big faith to do something for God? Discuss this with your communities group.
- Recall a time when a storm was raging in your life (maybe that's right now) and how you reacted or are reacting? According to this devotional, what next step in faith do you need to take?
- Commit time to pray today for more faith...God will give it to you!

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DAY 4

RISKING FAITH

It's No Risk To You Since God Owns It All

The Big Idea: Just like the servants in the Parable of the Talents, you, too, have been given Kingdom potential and Kingdom opportunity. You have been given them according to your ability—not anyone else's. You won't be judged against either another's potential or their actual production. Your only benchmark is your own faithfulness. As Charles Robinson pointed out, "The reward of being 'faithful over a few things' is just the same as being 'faithful over many things'; for the emphasis falls upon the same word; it is the 'faithful' who will enter 'into the joy of their Lord.'" It matters not if you have five, three or one-talent potential. What matters is what you do with what you have been given.

Read Matthew 25:15-18

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip. ...But the servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master's money.

You probably know this Parable of the Talents well. The servants were given talents (a sum of money) each according to their ability, with the expectation that they would use these resources to produce something of benefit for the master.

The first two did—and were rewarded handsomely; the third didn't—and was rebuked harshly. In fact, the talent was taken from the latter and given to the first servant, since he had proven to the master that he could increase exponentially whatever was placed within his care.

Now I have no way to prove this theologically, but I have a strong suspicion about this third servant. I don't think the master would have excoriated him if effort had at least preceded his failure. I think it was because he didn't try that the master's anger was unleashed upon him. He played it safe. He feared failing, so he didn't risk anything. This one-talent servant simply took what he had been given, protected it, and turned it back over to the master in the same condition in which he had received it. And the master blew a gasket!

This gracious but just master had entrusted something special to the servant and the servant did nothing to expand it. Now here is a crucial part of this story: The master had given his servant the talent according to his ability (verse 15). In other words, the master knew, even though it was small, there was production potential in this servant. But the servant wasted it! He let a golden opportunity slip by, and paid a heavy price for effortlessness. He didn't damage the talent; he

didn't lose it; he preserved it—thinking he was doing the master a favor. However, the master found that kind of fear-based, lazy-hearted stewardship odious and offensive.

You, too, have been given a talent—probably more: talents in the literal sense of the word, and talents in the sense of Kingdom potential and Kingdom opportunities. You have been given them according to your ability—not anyone else's. You won't be judged against either another's potential or their actual production. Your only benchmark is your own faithfulness. As Charles Robinson pointed out,

“The reward of being ‘faithful over a few things’ is just the same as being ‘faithful over many things’; for the emphasis falls upon the same word; it is the ‘faithful’ who will enter ‘into the joy of their Lord.’”

It matters not if you have five, three or one talent potential. What matters is what you do with what you have been given. You have been given your talents with the expectation that you will leverage your abilities to increase those talents and enlarge the kingdom for the real Master's sake.

The whole point of this story is this: Don't waste your opportunities. Don't let the possibility of failure paralyze you into inaction. If you do, the regret at the end of your faith journey won't be that you tried and failed. It will be that you didn't try.

Risk a little. Even if you fall flat on your face, the fact that your heart was pure and your motive was to increase your Master's Kingdom will bring you to the joyful place of hearing Him say to you on that glorious day,

*Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.
Enter into the joy of your lord.
(Matthew 25:23)*

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, all that I have is on loan from You—talents, resources, skills, gifts and opportunities. Today, grant me the courage to increase them for Your glory. May I know how great and good it is simply to please You which is all the reward I truly need and desire.



DAILY RESPONSE

🕒 **Have you ever stopped to think about the Kingdom opportunity that God has given you? Take some time to think about how God has blessed you and how He has equipped you to bless others.**

DAY 5

UNLIKELY FAITH

Add Your Name To The List Of Unlikelies

The Big Idea: “By faith, the prostitute Rahab...” Now that’s not normally something you hear in the same sentence. But that’s what so great about faith: It transforms prostitutes—and every other kind of dirty rotten sinner, which is what we all were, by the way—into people worthy of the Hall of Faith. If you are a person who lives by faith, one day your name will be added to the Great Hall along with a lot of other unlikelies. Just imagine that list looking something like this: “Rahab—a prostitute. You—a _____.” (Feel free to fill in the blank.) Simple faith trumps our past, sets us aright with God, transforms our character, enables spiritual heroism, and guarantees our place in God’s Great Hall of Faith.

Read Hebrews 11:31

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

Now there’s something you don’t hear in the same sentence very often—faith and a prostitutes.

But that’s what so great about faith: It transforms prostitutes—and every other kind of dirty rotten sinner, which is what we all were, by the way—into people worthy of God’s Great Hall of Faith.

Just look at some of the people who adorn the Great Hall in Hebrews 11:

Noah—a drunkard
 Abraham—a liar
 Jacob—a deceiver and world-class manipulator
 Joseph—an ex-con
 Moses—a murderer
 Gideon—a coward
 Samson—a profligate
 Jephthah—a reject
 David—an adulterer

And if you are a person who lives by faith, one day your name, along with those already mentioned, will be added to the Great Hall. Just imagine that list looking something like this:

Rahab—a prostitute
 You—a (feel free to fill in the blank)

We're in pretty good company, aren't we! But that's what so great about faith. It trumps our past, sets us aright with God, transforms our character, enables spiritual heroism and guarantees our place in God's Great Hall of Faith.

Whatever has happened in your past, whoever you are in the present, however limited your future may look, your faith will change everything. So stop what you are doing and start stepping out by faith.

What is faith? It is to passionately, fully, riskily, boldly believe God, then ruthlessly live your life accordingly. Simply put, it is to believe who God is and obey what God has said. Corrie Ten Boom said it this way: "Faith sees the invisible, believes the unbelievable, and receives the impossible."

"By faith!" That phrase is used 20 times in this one chapter. Make that the defining characteristic of your life. Pursue faith until faith possesses you.

It will change everything—and add your name to the other unlikelies already in the Hall!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I believe. Now destroy my unbelief until there is nothing left of me but the fingerprints of faith.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Has your past ever discouraged and kept you from stepping forward in faith? Do you think that this always has to be the case?**
- Where do you need to have faith beyond your failings?**
- Where is it "unlikely" in your life to see faith manifest but, by trusting in the Lord today, you can see God's hand work?**





WEEK

7

EXPERIENCE HABITS

DAY 1

GROW UP

Benchmarks for Spiritual Maturity

The Big Idea: God has designed those He has called into His family to grow from infancy into spiritual adulthood. When they don't, it signifies that something has gone terribly wrong—what we would call a failure to thrive. But when we make a commitment to spiritual growth and get intentional about the things that growth requires, we will make God very happy. And we will enjoy it too!

Read Hebrews 5:11-14

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

When I was just a kid, there was a family in our small country church who would bring their child and put him in a crib at the back of the sanctuary. There was just one problem: he was nine or ten years old. The amazing thing was, he looked in every way like a toddler, even though he was a school-age boy. He suffered from a condition that doctors call “failure to thrive.” He was physically unable to grow up.

Babies are cute—when they're babies. But they're not meant to stay babies. God has designed them to grow and mature and become adults. When they don't, something is terribly wrong.

Likewise, God has designed those He has called into His family to grow from infancy into spiritual adulthood. When they don't, it signifies that something has gone terribly wrong. Such was the case with these people the writer of Hebrews addressed—and it was quite disconcerting to him.

In pointing out the various ways they have remained in spiritual infancy, he also clearly benchmarks what spiritual maturity ought to look like for us. Here are five levels of spiritual maturity that you can use to diagnose your own growth as a believer:

Level 1: You must be able to grasp more than the just basics of the faith.

Verse 11 says, “We have so much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.” God's will is not just that we be saved, but that we grasp the height, breadth and depth of the faith—the deeper truths of the Christian walk.

Jesus never told His disciples to go save the lost. He said we're to go and make disciples of all people...teaching them to obey all that He commanded. Unfortunately, some of us never get beyond just the salvation stuff. We never move beyond baptism, or tithing, or simple obedience-the "milk."

Are you at a place in your spiritual life where you are grasping the deeper doctrines of the Word? Grade yourself on this one. Are you at a kindergarten level spiritually, or are you at graduate level learning?

Level 2: You must be able to articulate what and why you believe.

Verse 12 says, "You have been Christians a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures."

Teaching here doesn't necessarily involve standing before a classroom presenting a formal lesson. Teaching is the ability to explain something so that others can understand it. Can you explain to others the ABC's of the faith? Are you able to demonstrate from your life and your lips to a new believer what the Christian walk is all about? If someone else's walk with Christ depended on imitating you, what would their spiritual maturity look like?

Grade yourself on this one. If you're not comfortable with someone depending on you to lead them into spiritual maturity, then you're not there yourself.

Level 3: You must be able to feed yourself.

The last part of verse 12 says, "You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food." As cute and sweet as babies are, they're a lot of work. You have to tend to their every need, clean them, clothe them, bathe them, prepare their meals and feed them. They can't do it on their own. Eventually, though, good parents will train their children to eat solid food and then teach them to feed themselves; otherwise, they'll always be sucking on a bottle and never able to eat solid food.

Whenever I hear someone complain about not getting spiritually fed in church, 99% of the time it's because they haven't grown up enough to feed themselves. So where are you on this one? Is your spiritual nourishment coming primarily from your own efforts...or are you mostly depending on someone else for it?

Level 4: You must be able to make Godly decisions.

Verses 13-14 say, "And a person who is living on milk isn't very far along in the Christian life and doesn't know much about doing what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right." We judge levels of maturity by the wise or foolish decisions people make. Mature believers have developed the ability to make God-honoring decisions. That's an end product of maturity.

How are you on this one: Is your life characterized by wise decision-making, or do you find yourself falling into sin over and over again? Are there godly patterns of living or is there a track record of sinful habits.

Level 5: You must be willing to fully submit to God.

You will have to look at Hebrews 6:1-3 for this one. It says, “So let us stop going over the basics of Christianity again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don’t need to start all over again with the importance of turning away from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don’t need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And so, God willing, we will move forward to further understanding.”

What the writer is saying is that the problem wasn’t a lack of knowledge, but a lack of obedience. At some point, people who are growing in their faith begin to apply their knowledge of scripture. They begin to live out their faith in every area of their lives. They don’t compartmentalize their lives so Jesus is Lord over some areas but not others. They become fully devoted to God.

Grade yourself in this area. Are you fully submitted to God in your private life? Your thought life? Your financial life? In your relationships? What about your speech? God wants you to grow. He designed you to grow. It is honoring to Him when you grow.

So, are you growing? If you cannot point to growth, the writer of Hebrews would say to you, “Grow up!”

Make a commitment to growth and start doing the things that growth requires. You will make God very happy—and you’ll enjoy it too!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I desire to grow into a fully mature saint. I commit myself to spiritual growth—I will give it my best efforts. Keep me from complacency and self-satisfaction in this arena. I pray, afflict me with holy discontent in my spiritual formation so that I might constantly strive for Christ-likeness in every dimension of my being.



DAILY RESPONSE

- When you were a kid, were you ever anxious to grow up and be an adult? What are some of the things you committed to grow up and “become” when you were a child?**
- Why is it important for the Christian to grow up and mature?**

DAY 2

HOW YOU THINK

The Key To Everything

The Big Idea: God created us with a mind, and He commands us to think. Isaiah 1:18 says, “Come now, let us reason together.” And the primary path for our reasoning is God’s Word. When God gave us His revelation, He didn’t give us a movie...or a series of music videos...not even a book on tape with background organ music. He gave us the written Word...which by nature calls us and causes us to think. And it leads us to right thinking, which is the key to all else God desires from us and for us in this life.

Read Romans 12:2

Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God change you into a new person by changing the way you think.

We have a calling as Christians to right thinking. Right thinking is the key to everything—to godly living, to significance and satisfaction, to relational wholeness, to the abundant life, to spiritual growth, to joy—everything!

Paul writes that we are to let God change us by changing the way we think. In Philippians 4:8, he describes the kind of thinking that will lead to the changed life:

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

When Paul says to “think about such things”, he intentionally chose the Greek term “logizomai”, which means to compute, to calculate—to think deliberately, proactively and strategically. It speaks of an exercise in mental reflection that affects one’s conduct. It is the word from which we get our word for logic. In other words, as those who have been redeemed, through the mercy of God by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, thinking this way is only logical. When Paul tells us in Romans 12:1-2 to present our bodies as living sacrifices—sacrifices that remain in the holiness imputed to us by Christ’s own sacrificial death—he says this is primarily possible through the transformation of our thinking, i.e., “right thinking.” Interestingly, when Paul says this is our “reasonable (rational, intelligent) service and spiritual worship” (Amplified Bible), he uses that same Greek root word for logical, *logikos*, i.e., “right thinking.”

Now herein lies an important truth about the human mind: What we do—our behavior—and what is done to us—our circumstances—do not produce what we think. Rather, what we think produces our behavior in any given set of circumstances. That is, “right thinking” enables and encourages “right living”—godliness, a Christ-like response to life, an eternal perspective, an attitude of abundance, a Biblical worldview, etc.

Psychiatrist William Glasser, the father of reality therapy, discovered in his study of how the brain works that man isn't controlled by external factors, but by internal desires. Furthermore, our desires are predetermined by our thinking. So he concluded that the mind is the command center determining conduct. Therefore the critical issue for man is how he thinks.

Glasser had only discovered what the Bible had already said long ago—that we are the product of our thinking. Proverbs 23:7 says, “As a man thinks within himself, so he is.” That’s why Proverbs 4:23 also says, “Above all else, guard your heart (the heart In Hebrew thought was the center of thinking) for it is the wellspring of life.”

If you want to improve your experience of life, deliberately and strategically change your thinking. So when Paul says, “think about,” he doesn’t mean to leave it up to whatever pops into your brain. He’s saying to intentionally and rigidly allow only certain things into your mind. He is referring to the practice or spiritual discipline of setting godly virtues and Biblical values as the gatekeeper of your mind.

He’s not suggesting silly mind-games or positive thinking, mere optimism, or some type of self-hypnosis, he’s calling us to think deeply, rationally and habitually about the things of God. He is calling us to think first, think early, think often, think deeply, think always. Think first, act second, feel third! Then your feelings will be managed by your thinking and your actions will be sound.

God created us with a mind, and He commands us to think. Isaiah 1:18 says, “Come now, let us reason together.” And the primary path for our reasoning is God’s Word. When God gave us His revelation, He didn’t give us a movie...or a series of music videos...not even a book on tape with background organ music. He gave us the written Word...which by nature calls us and causes us to think.

In his book, “Your Mind Matters,” John Stott wrote, “Sin has more dangerous effects on our feeling than our thinking, because our opinions are more easily checked and regulated by revealed truth than are experiences.” Right thinking is the key to Godly character.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out that our worry and anxiety are “a failure to think” that God is close and in control, and that He cares about you. Most people assume worry comes from thinking too much. But in reality we get anxious for not thinking enough in the right direction. Right thinking is thinking rightly about God’s purposes, promises, and plans. Right thinking is thinking reasonably about God’s revealed Truth. Right thinking is the key to Spirit-controlled emotions.

A.W. Tozer wrote in his book, “Knowledge of the Holy,” What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” Right thinking is the key to your experience of God.

Thinking rightly is the catalyst for a great life. So watch your input; it becomes thought. Watch your thoughts; they become attitudes. Watch your attitudes; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

Now go think rightly. It's the key to everything!

Here is another way to think about it: Let the mind of the Master become the master of your mind.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I offer You my mind. With Your help, I will closely guard what I allow into it. With Your help, I will learn to think rightly. With Your help, I will make the mind of the Master the master of my mind. With Your help, my every thought will be pleasing to You. With Your help—that is what I need.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Why do you suppose it is so important to think rightly?
- How do you see your thinking producing your behavior and outcomes?
- How does God want us to think?
- What scriptures come to mind (or can you search and find) that address our thinking as God wants it to be?

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DAY 3

YIELD

Being Spirit-Filled—Every Day

The Big Idea: If you are a believer, the Spirit-filled life is not an option, it's a divine expectation. Spirit-filled living is a Christian essential. And nothing else compares to that kind of life to satisfy every longing of your heart and enable you to experience the favor of God. The greatest and longest lasting "high" in this world comes from Spirit-filled living. So be filled with the Spirit.

Read Ephesians 5:18

Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you.

If you are a believer, the Spirit-filled life is not an option, it's a divine expectation. Spirit-filled living is a Christian essential.

In the New International Version of the Bible, when Paul says, "Don't get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery (meaningless, valueless, even self-destructive living), instead be filled with the Spirit," he was speaking to believers who'd come out of the pagan culture of Ephesus.

In their pagan worship and ritual, one of their idols was Baccus, the god of wine and drunken orgies. And they believed that to commune with their god and be led by him they had to get drunk. In their drunken stupor, they believed they could know his will and how best to serve him. And the sick bi-product of their out-of-control intoxication was to engage in sexual immorality with temple prostitutes.

Just as depending on wine was a destructive counterfeit to Spirit-filled living in Paul's day, so we need to be careful in our culture today where alcohol is the drink of choice to help people relax, feel confident, or take away the pain of whatever ails them, and make them feel good, so we don't buy into that deceptive line. I am not preaching against drinking, because I don't believe the Scriptures explicitly forbid it. But unfortunately, there are a lot of Christians today whose drinking habits are no different from unbelievers. The truth is, it is still God's desire that we depend on being filled with His Spirit to make us confident, competent and joyful rather than a drink, or a relationship or position or a possession, for that matter.

In truth, nothing compares to the Spirit-filled life to satisfy every longing of your heart and enable you to experience the good life. The greatest and longest lasting "high" in this world comes from Spirit-filled living.

Paul is not referring to that instantaneous infilling of the Spirit that we read about in Acts 2, but rather the ongoing submission of our will to God's work through an active yielding of one's life to the Spirit's control.

Spirit filling in the book of Acts was an event, while the filling in Ephesians is an ongoing process. In Acts, it was evidenced by extraordinary, miraculous happenings while in Ephesians, it was evidenced by ordinary, everyday choices that submitted them to the Spirit. In Acts, the Spirit was received by asking in faith, while in Ephesians the Spirit is responded to by yielding in obedience. Both kinds of Spirit infilling are valid, and needed.

Being filled with the Spirit is not a matter of eliminating sinful or unproductive behavior in your life and passively waiting for God to supernaturally fill you. Paul is saying it's about eliminating those things that grieve Him and replacing them with passions that please Him. Living the Spirit-filled life is about the daily choices you make to yield control to Him—choices to imitate God and eliminate immoral or questionable practices; choices to find out what pleases God; choices to find out what God's will is.

The great evangelist D.L.Moody went to England for an evangelistic crusade, but was met with some professional jealousy. One pastor protested, "Why do we need this 'Mr. Moody'? He's uneducated and inexperienced. Who does he think he is anyway? Does he think he has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit?" One wise pastor pointed out, "Moody doesn't have more of the Holy Spirit than we do, but the Holy Spirit has more of Mr. Moody."

Make a decision today to allow the Holy Spirit to have more of you! In every area of your life, yield control to Him—that's what it means to be Spirit-filled.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God the Holy Spirit, take control of all of me—mind, tongue, hands, eyes—all my thoughts, words and actions. Have more of me, I pray.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Do you find it easy or difficult to yield to authority and the suggestions of others?**
- If you were to take a self-inventory, how would you rate your submission to God in all areas of life?**
- Have you made a decision to submit to God and live a Spirit-filled life? If so, how has this changed you? If not, what has held you back up to this point?**
- Pray the simple prayer at the end of this devotional every day this week and see what God does in your life.**

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DAY 4

THE HOLY BODY

My Physical Life Is Important To Its Designer

The Big Idea: Paul calls our bodies “the temple of the Holy Spirit”, which should alert us to pay better attention to how we care for them. Yet we tend to treat proper “temple care” as optional; opting instead for excess eating, under-exercising, and over-indulging our own selfish desires. We love on our spirits, pamper our emotions, and feed our intellect, but our bodies—too often we treat them like a rental house from which we are about to be evicted. However, Paul says that we’re to honor God with our bodies. Let’s start taking that as seriously as the Bible says we should.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, Who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

I don’t quite understand how things will play out when we as believers stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ. Maybe it will have nothing to do with the negative image the word “judgment” conjures in our mind. Perhaps the judgment will only be a positive experience, as when an arbitrator renders a favorable judgment on our behalf.

However, the Apostle Paul speaks of the believer having to give account at that moment for the deeds done while living in the body—whether good or bad. (See 2 Corinthians 5:9-11) It is hard to imagine feeling any remorse when you’ve permanently planted your foot in heaven for the first time, but it could be that we will feel some momentary remorse at that moment over wasted opportunity to grow into Christlikeness or failure to trust God to a greater degree, or the lack of effort to extend His Kingdom while we were on planet earth. I say “momentary remorse” because I can’t imagine anything but sheer joy when we, unworthy sinners saved only by grace, get to spend eternity in God’s heaven.

If there is momentary remorse, one of the areas of disappointment for many Christians of our day will surely be how we have treated our physical bodies. Paul called our bodies “the temple of the Holy Spirit”, which should have alerted us to pay better attention to how we care for them. Yet we have treated proper “temple care” as optional; opting instead for excess eating, under-exercising, and over-indulging our own selfish desires. We have loved on our spirits, pampered our emotions, and fed our intellect, but our bodies—we have treated them like a rental house from which we are about to be evicted.

However, Paul says that we’re to honor God with our bodies. Why? They are not ours—they really belong to God. We’re driving His car, so to speak, and it’s not a Yugo (which is now extinct, so you won’t be offended), it’s a Lamborghini. He created our physical bodies, designed them

in His very own image, put the Breath of Life in us, then after we had irreparably corrupted them through sin, He redeemed them at a very costly price to Himself. Our bodies belong to God, and one day we're going to turn them back in to Him. As Martha Graham said, "The body is a sacred garment." We really ought to give careful thought then, to how we treat them between now and eternity.

So what should be we doing with these "holy bods" that have been loaned out to us? Let me suggest three things:

First, treat them physically as if God Himself were living inside—which He is. Watch what you eat—and how much, get the proper amount of rest and exercise; give them the best appearance you can—without over indulging, and keep them untainted by immorality and other kinds of impurity.

Second, use them to serve God. The Holy Spirit inhabits your body, and He has placed within certain of His gifts, unique to you. Make sure you are exercising those gifts to His glory by serving others.

Third, offer them as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. After all, in light of his creation and recreation of them, it is the least you can do. As Paul urged in Romans 12:1 (The Message), "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him."

Yeah, you're walking around at the moment in a "holy bod"! So remember, you're going to turn it back in some day!

I would encourage you to make this practical by writing out an improvement plan for your use of "the temple" in the following three areas: 1) Your physical habits—how you can eat, rest and exercise more consistently. 2) Your spiritual gifts—how and where you can serve in the Body of Christ. 3) Your sacrificial worship—how you can turn your physical life into a daily offering to God.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I offer You my body as a living sacrifice. May You find dwelling in this "temple" fully and continually pleasing.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Why do you suppose God considers the care of our physical bodies to be important?
- How do we care for our physical bodies in a way that honors God?
- How do we use our physical body to serve the spiritual body of Christ?

DAY 5

DUDE, CONTROL YOURSELF

Self-Mastery Is A Holy Activity

The Big Idea: What does the Bible mean by self-control? Primarily it means to master your moods, impulses and behaviors. The root word from which self-control was derived meant to “take hold of something” or literally, to “get a grip.” In whatever particular area of life we struggle—our temper, our moods, our sexual desires, our consumption, our spending, our physical health, our speech—the Biblical writers would say, “Get a grip on this thing!” It is that important!

Read Proverbs 25:28

Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

What does the Bible mean by self-control? Primarily it means to master your moods, impulses and behavior. What it doesn't mean is simply to delay gratification. In our culture, delayed gratification means waiting two minutes in the fast food drive-thru instead of one, or to give up Coke for Lent—and drink Pepsi instead.

Self-control may mean giving something up completely. Self-control is the ability to direct my physical desires to fulfill God's purposes, instead of using them for my own personal gratification. Self-control means taking care of my body in a God-honoring way. Self-control means biting my tongue instead of making that sarcastic remark. Self-control means saying “no” to something I want but isn't good for me. Self-control says to a watching world that God's long-range purposes for my life are more important than what looks and feels good right now. Self-control means to take dominion over my fleshly desires.

The root word from which self-control was derived meant to “take hold of something” or literally, to “get a grip.” In whatever particular area of life we struggle, these Biblical writers would say, “Get a grip on this thing!” And they are very specific about the areas where we are to get a grip and practice self-control. Foundationally, they would say get a grip in every area of your life. But there are some specific areas which the book of Proverbs, in particular, exhorts us to exercise self-control:

In Proverbs 29:11 we're told to get a grip on our temper and on our moods: “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.”

Proverbs 6:25-26 tells us that we'd better control our sexual desire: “Do not lust in your heart after the beauty of an adulterous woman, or let her captivate you with her eyes, for she will reduce you to a loaf of bread...” In other words, if you lack control in the area of sexual purity, you're toast man! You give over control to impure thoughts, pornography, or an inappropriate relationship, it will lead you right down the path to destruction.

Proverbs 21:20 teaches us to get a grip on our consumption and spending: “In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.”

Proverbs 23:29-35 talks about getting a grip on our drinking habits: “In the end, it’s going to bite you like a viper.”

Proverbs 23:4 warns us to get a grip even on our ambition: “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.”

Proverbs 23:1-3 also speaks of getting a grip on our physical lives: “When you go out to dinner with an influential person, mind your manners: Don’t gobble your food, don’t talk with your mouth full. And don’t stuff yourself; bridle your appetite.” (Message)

Proverbs 10:19 says, “Don’t talk too much, for it fosters sin. Be sensible and turn off the flow!” (New Living Translation) Getting a grip on our mouth is one of the most discussed and most difficult areas where Proverbs calls for self-control. In fact, in the 31 chapters of Proverbs there are over 150 references to how we use, or misuse, our words.

You know, it’s too bad, in light of the last point, that God didn’t create the human body to include a mouth zipper. That would have made things a lot easier for some of us! But since He didn’t, self-control is still the best and only option for managing our mouth, and managing our life.

So where do you begin? Let me suggest 3 starting points for cultivating self-control:

Step one, start with You! One of the most profitable discoveries we can make in life is to realize that we can only work on changing us! This is the very first step to taking responsibility for your lack of self-control. John Maxwell said it this way: “The first victory that successful people ever achieve or win, is the victory over themselves.”

Step two, start small! The old adage is true, “you can eat an elephant...one bite at a time!” Don’t get overwhelmed with how far you may have to go. God is ready right now to give you just the right amount of grace and strength to gain mastery of these areas. He doesn’t give you a reservoir of grace and strength for a month or a year from now. But like the manna in the desert, He gives you the right amount for today. And tomorrow, He’ll give you the right amount for that day. So just do what you can with what you’ve got!

Step three, start now! Today is God’s gift to you—that’s why it’s called the present—so get after it! John Hancock said, “All worthwhile men have good thoughts, good ideas, and good intentions, but precious few ever translate them into action.”

So, your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is simply to identify one area where you want to begin exercising self-control. Then write out the first step you will need to take to achieve mastery in this area. And if you are willing, share your plan with someone with whom you will become accountable. Finally, just do it.

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WEEK

8

EXPERIENCE COMMUNITY

DAY 1

BLESSABLE UNITY IN FATHER'S FAMILY

What God Insists On Blessing

The Big Idea: Unity may be difficult to define, and even harder to achieve, but when you and I do our part to arrive at unity in the body of Christ, look out! Good things will happen. Like Vance Havner said, "Snowflakes are frail, but if enough of them get together they can stop traffic." So can we—when we have unity.

Read Psalm 133:1-3

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Running down on the beard,
The beard of Aaron,
Running down on the edge of his garments.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—
Life forevermore.*

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" Unity! I am not always sure what it is, but I sure know when it ain't!

And I know when it is. Where you have unity between people—at work, in school, in home and at church—there you will find that life is pleasant. And that's how God meant for life to be—especially for His people.

So how can we achieve and maintain unity? I think first of all it requires us to understand how important it is to God. In His final prayer before the cross, knowing what awaited Him in the hours ahead, Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers in John 17:20-23,

"I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that You gave me, that they may be one as We are One: I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved me."

What a person prays for in their final prayer reveals what is of utmost importance to them. For Jesus, that was our unity. The next time we have opportunity for disunity, we ought to stop and think about that.

Then it requires humility. For unity to occur, I must subjugate my desires and needs to what is good and best for others. Speaking of unity, the Apostle Paul exhorted us to follow Christ's example in Philippians 2:1-4:

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others...[an attitude] that was the same as that of Christ Jesus."

Furthermore, unity will be achieved when we submit ourselves to the spiritual leaders God has placed over us, whose primary task is to equip us to carry out God's purposes on planet earth. And those purposes include the body of Christ being build up and coming to full unity of the Spirit. Paul taught about this in Ephesians 4:12-13,

"[Spiritual leaders are called] to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Finally, unity will have its best chance when I make unity my personal responsibility. How do I go about that? Once again, Paul hits the nail on the head in Romans 12:9-21. Take a moment to read his checklist for unity, but verse 18 encapsulates it well:

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Yes, it may be difficult to define unity, but when you and I do our part to achieve it in the body of Christ, look out! Good things will happen. Like Vance Havner said, "Snowflakes are frail, but if enough of them get together they can stop traffic."

What do you say we stop some traffic this week!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You have said that I won't even have to ask You for blessings when I live in unity with Your people; You will command Your blessing to be upon me and those within my spiritual community. So remind me early and often how important the spiritual unity of my fellowship is to You, and empower me to do my part to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bonds of peace.



DAILY RESPONSE

☉ Which of today's scriptures stands out to you the most about unity?

DAY 2

BETTER TOGETHER

Two Are Better Than One

The Big Idea: According to the writer of Ecclesiastes, we are better together. That's because God created us as relational beings; we need each other. Moreover, as we cultivate and cherish life together in God's family, we actually reflect God's image, for God is a relational being. And as we reflect His image, we will also fulfill His intent. When we get and keep fellowship with others as the priority of our lives, we will experience the most satisfying benefit that God intends for mankind—relational connection.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

I've noticed something in life that's pointless: someone who's alone. He has no family, no friends...This is useless—a miserable way to live. Two are better than one since they can work more effectively—there's mutual effort. If one falls down, the other can help him up—there's mutual support. But if he's alone and falls, it's just too bad, because there's no one to help. If it's cold, two can huddle together to stay warm—there's mutual encouragement. But how can you keep warm by yourself? Two can resist an attack that would defeat one person alone—there's mutual protection. And a rope of three cords is hard to break—there's mutual strength.

According to the writer of Ecclesiastes, aka “the preacher,” two are better than one. That's because God created us as relational beings; we're better together. And as we cultivate and cherish life together in God's family, we reflect God's image; we fulfill God's intent. When we get and keep fellowship with others as the priority of our lives, we experience the most satisfying benefit that God intends for mankind: relational connection. But miss out on that connectivity and we will never be whole, healthy or happy!

A recent study said the #1 emotional problem of Americans is loneliness—having no profound, life-sustaining connections. The California Department of Health found in mental fitness research that if you are relationally disconnected, and have a sense that no one knows, gets or loves you for who you are, you are:

- 4 times more likely to suffer emotional burnout
- 5 times more likely to suffer clinical depression
- 10 times more likely to be treated for mental illness
- 2 to 3 times more likely to die an early death

However, the Bible offers us a treatment for this national epidemic of loneliness: relational connection. In other words, spiritual community is good medicine. Proverbs 27:9 says, “Sweet friendship refreshes the soul.” We are better together!

The question, then, is how can we have a deeper experience of the community God created us to enjoy? Let me suggest three ways:

One, be courageous and start pursuing community with others. My dad used to say to me, “Son, if you want friends, show yourself friendly.” He was saying that rather than waiting for people to seek me out and include me in their friendship group, I would need to initiate. That takes courage, because fear is always there to hinder us from pursuing deeper relationships; fear is always there to hurt our experience of community. Fear comes from sin, and being afraid is simply the first-fruit of sin’s harvest in our lives.

- Fear makes us distant: We fear being exposed, then rejected, so we hide by concealing emotions and not letting people get close.
- Fear makes us defensive: To preserve the image we want folks to have of us, we blame, avoid accountability and reject advice. We keep our guard up. We isolate.
- Fear makes us demanding: We become controlling or dominating or manipulating. We sabotage our opportunities to let people know and love us.

Each of those—being distant, defensive and demanding—are all sin’s attempt to compensate for fear.

They try but fail to protect us; in reality, they push people away. Fear destroys community.

However, relational courage is available as God’s gift. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, “For the Holy Spirit, God’s gift, does not want you to be afraid of people, but to be wise, strong, loving and enjoy being with them.” Do you realize the first-fruit of the Spirit’s indwelling is always boldness? When the Spirit moves in, guess who has to move out to make room: Fear!

All that to say, the starting point in overcoming fear and connecting relationally is to pause and pray, “Holy Spirit, fill me with courage to take the first step.” If you’re hindered by fear, let it go! If you are waiting for someone to initiate, stop! Just invite the Spirit to indwell you and embolden you! Then walk across the room and engage.

Two, be considerate and start meeting others’ needs. Acts 2:44-45 says, “The believers met together constantly and shared everything with each other, selling their possessions and dividing with those in need.” Acts 4:32-34 says, “None of the believers claimed what they owned was their own; they shared ... And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy people among them.”

If you approach community in terms of what you will get, all you will get is disappointment. But make it about what you can give and you will gain satisfaction—and friends. God guarantees it. Jesus said, “Give and it’ll be given to you...the blessing is in giving not receiving.” (Acts 20:35, Luke 6:38)

Three, be constructive and start encouraging others. One of the most powerful blessings of authentic community is the encouragement we give and receive from one another. It’s life-giving and it’s attractive.

One of the outstanding characters in the Christian community of the early chapters of Acts was a man nicknamed Barnabas, the “son of encouragement.” He was so encouraging that he brought Saul, a radical Jewish terrorist who converted to Christ, into the community when no one else would. Acts 9:26-27 says,

“Saul tried to join the disciples in Jerusalem, but they were afraid that he wasn’t a true disciple. But Barnabas brought him to the apostles, sharing how Saul had encountered the Lord, and how in Damascus he had then preached fearlessly in Jesus’ name.”

Would Saul the terrorist become Paul the apostle of grace without Barnabas the encourager? Who knows, but maybe not. The truth is, there are any number of “Saul’s” in your world. What might happen if you came alongside them in community and poured encouragement into their lives? You never know, but you just might release greatness in the next Paul! Be an encourager, and you’ll never lack community.

We have the awesome potential for making a huge impact in the lives of people by living out the Biblical injunction to encourage one another daily. That’s what Hebrews 10:25 tells us: “Let’s not give up meeting together, as some are now doing, but let’s encourage one another—and all the more as we see the Day approaching.”

Let’s commit to that: Meeting together to give and get spiritual encouragement—we’re going to need it as the day of the Lord approaches. It’s arguably the most powerful force for building and maintaining spiritual community.

That brings us back to this idea of better together. As the Bible says, two are better than one; we are much better, stronger and healthier when we are connected. Are you? I hope so. If not, I hope you will become so.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You have created me for relational connection. Constantly convict me of that through the work of Your Holy Spirit. Give me the courage to pursue it. Help me to be the kind of giving person that people are drawn to. And help me to exhibit the kind of authentic encouragement that people will want to relationally connect with. Help me to fulfill Your design and Your intent by being closely and intentionally connected to others in Your family.

DAY 3

CULTIVATING HEALING COMMUNITY

Yet Another Benefit Of Your Community Group

The Big Idea: They (whoever “they” are) say that confession is good for the soul. That’s true. But it’s good for the whole, too...the whole person—body mind and soul. Confession and repentance will lead not only to the cleansing of your heart, it will bring release to your mind and perhaps it will even be the catalyst that speeds healing to your body. That is yet one more of the many essential benefits of belongs to a small group community.

Read James 5:16

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

I don’t think James is promoting the idea that you stand up in front of the congregation and blurt out all your sins from the past week—bad words, dirty thoughts, rotten attitudes and dark deeds. While that might be quite entertaining to the rest of the folks sitting in the pews, it probably wouldn’t have the intended results James had in mind.

I suspect James is speaking of being in accountable relationships, perhaps a small group of some kind where the conditions have been cultivated for redemptive confession to take place. That’s why I am a firm believer that every Christian needs a small group of two to eight people where relationships have developed enough that this kind of open sharing can take place.

That kind of group does not happen overnight. It takes time. It takes a track record of confidentiality. It takes the absolute certainty that your fellow group members will have your back. It has to be a safe place. It must be a place where you know that the others have your best interests in mind. And it needs to be a place where you give your spiritual partners permission to look deeply into your soul, ask you penetrating questions, and hold your feet to the fire for your spiritual walk.

Do you have a group like that? If you don’t, ask God to bring people into your life with whom you can develop that kind of soul-healing community. Then do the hard work of cultivating openness and accountability with them. I have done that now for years, and would not even begin to think of doing life any other way. It is one of the activities of my week that keeps me spiritually grounded.

They (whoever “they” are) say that confession is good for the soul. That’s true. But it’s good for the whole, too...the whole person—body mind and soul. Confession and repentance will lead not only to the cleansing of your heart, it will bring release to your mind and perhaps it will even be the catalyst that speeds healing to your body. That is yet one more of the many essential benefits of belonging to a small group community.

In the early chapters of Genesis, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” He was not only speaking of Adam needing Eve, He was providing insight into how He had designed the human race. We were created for fellowship—and not only with Him. In fact, Adam already had fellowship with God when God uttered those words, so apparently having only the Almighty as a friend was insufficient, by the Creator’s own design. No, God also created Adam, as the representative head of the human race, to need others for human and holistic health.

You need that, too. So do I.

So once again, let these words from James sink in:

James 1:16

“If you have sinned, you should tell each other what you have done. Then you can pray for one another and be healed. The prayer of an innocent person is powerful, and it can help a lot.”

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, thank You for the people that You have brought into my life who are not afraid to look me in the eye and ask me penetrating questions about the condition of my heart. Give them the constant courage, penetrating insight, and abundant grace that I need from them to stay spiritual healthy.

And what a gift that is.

 **DAILY RESPONSE**

- Have you ever experienced the healing power of confessing something to another trusted person? If so, share this with your communities group. If not, you may want to give it a try in your group.
- Why do you think God designed repentance of sin to be directed toward Christ and confession of those sins to be shared with other believers?
- Who can you trust and confide in this week?

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DAY 4

BEING RIGHT WITH GOD REQUIRES BEING RIGHT WITH MY NEIGHBOR

Cultivating Shalom in the Community of Christ

The Big Idea: Whether it was the Lord's Prayer, the Great Commandment, the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus or a whole host of other passages, you cannot deny that your relationship with your neighbor is as important to God as your relationship with Him. God is clear that you honor, serve, obey and love Him as you do the same with your spouse, children, customers, fellow workers and employer, to name a few. So take great care with how you treat people.

Read Leviticus 6:1-7

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Suppose one of you sins against your associate and is unfaithful to the Lord. Suppose you cheat in a deal involving a security deposit, or you steal or commit fraud, or you find lost property and lie about it, or you lie while swearing to tell the truth, or you commit any other such sin. If you have sinned in any of these ways, you are guilty. You must give back whatever you stole, or the money you took by extortion, or the security deposit, or the lost property you found, or anything obtained by swearing falsely. You must make restitution by paying the full price plus an additional 20 percent to the person you have harmed. On the same day you must present a guilt offering. As a guilt offering to the Lord, you must bring to the priest your own ram with no defects, or you may buy one of equal value. Through this process, the priest will purify you before the Lord, making you right with Him, and you will be forgiven for any of these sins you have committed."

Did you catch that? If we sin against our neighbor, we have been unfaithful to God! How is it that we miss this when it is the clear teaching of Scripture—both Old Testament and New? Yet so many people who fancy themselves as being close to God are anything but, because they allow such poor relationships to exist in their relational sphere.

So let's be very clear about this since God himself was so clear: Nothing is more important to God than shalom within the family of God. We cannot harm a human relationship without damaging our heavenly relationship with the Father of us all. Likewise, if we have been harmed by another person yet refuse to forgive them, or forgive but somehow convince ourselves that forgiveness does not require us to forget and participate in repairing the relationship, then we are guilty of unfaithfulness to God.

Think that is too strong? Well, consider what Jesus said as he taught us how to pray God's Kingdom and Divine will into our lives. There was an undeniable condition that Jesus added to

effectively praying the Lord’s Prayer: “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15)

Whether it was the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) or the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus (John 17:20-25) or a whole host of other passages, you cannot deny that your relationship with your neighbor (see Luke 10:25-37 for a definition of who your neighbor is) is as important to God as your relationship with Him. God’s clear expectation is that you honor, serve, obey and love Him as you do the same with your spouse, children, customers, fellow workers and employer, just to name a few.

So my advice to you is, take great care with how you treat people. And as far as it is possible, as much as it depends on you, make and keep things right with everyone. (Romans 12:18) In fact, your acceptable sacrifice of worship to God (Romans 12:1-2) is contingent upon how you live out your faith with people (Romans 12:3-21).

Yeah, it’s a big deal. So get right and stay right with people. Your Father is counting on you!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, please show me when I have offended a brother or sister. Allow me no rest until I have made things right with others in my spiritual family. And when others have offended me, give me the grace to forgive quickly, freely and fully.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Why is right relationship with each other so important to God?
- What do the scriptures in today’s devotional tell you about how crucial healthy human relationships are?
- Is there someone that comes to mind that you need to reconcile with before doing anything else?

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DAY 5

ONE-ANOTHERING

The Final Apologetic

The Big Idea: God created us to need one another. Acts 2:44 says of the early Christians, “All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another.” Acts 4:32 adds, “They were united as one...they all shared everything they had with one another.” “One another” became a primary identifying characteristic of first believers’ life together. It must become ours as well. Francis Schaeffer said that believers. “In relationship with one another is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic.”

Read 1 John 4:12

Though we’ve never seen God, when we love one another, God lives in us, and His love within us grows stronger and stronger.

In the pioneer days of America, settlers were pushing westward into vast, unexplored territory. The pioneer was the epitome of self-reliance; with axe and rifle, he became the national hero. To settle the land, our government gave 160-acre parcels, and happy homesteaders headed out of crowded cities just for a chance to be landowners. And the first thing they did was to build a cabin to live in, right in the middle of their property.

They’d never owned land, so they wanted to feel that everything as far as the eye could see on all four sides was theirs, and theirs alone. But that all changed, because their self-chosen isolation really did a number on them. Photographers who went to record frontier life returned with photos of wild, bizarre people.

So these homesteaders started moving from the center to the corner of the land to be closer to three other families who did the same. They needed one another! Four families sharing life together had a chance of surviving...and thriving. They needed one another!

God created us to need one another. Acts 2:44 says of the early Christians, “All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another.” Acts 4:32 adds, “They were united as one...They all shared everything they had with one another.”

“One another,”...That became a primary identifying characteristic of first believers’ life together.

The Greek word for “one another” is “allelon”—one of the most used words of significance in the New Testament. It is distinctly used at least forty-seven times. The one who set the bar for this one-anothering was Jesus in John 13:35, “By this the whole world will know that you’re My disciples: that you love one another.” The disciples’ one-anothering was living proof to a lost world of a loving God. And it still is!

Francis Schaeffer said that believers “In relationship with one another is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic.”

Here are just three categories of the one-anothers that are critical to our life together as a spiritual community:

One group of the one-anothers relates to the unity of our community:

- Be at peace with one another. (Mark 9:50)
- Don't complain about one another. (John 6:43)
- Be of the same mind with one another. (Rom. 12:16)

A second group of the one-anothers relates to our mutual love:

- Serve one another in love. (Gal. 5:13)
- Tolerate one another in love. (Eph. 4:2)
- Greet one another with a kiss of love. (I Pet. 5:14)

And a third group of the one-anothers falls into the category of humility:

- Give preference to one another. (Rom. 12:10)
- Serve one another. (Gal. 5:13)
- Wash one another's feet. (John 13:14)

Unbreakable unity, unconditional love, unselfish humility—that's what makes our one-anothering possible, makes us distinct as believers as well as attractive to the lost, and invites the favor of heaven. And as we engage in one-anothering, in all its multifaceted expressions, we are simply living out the witness of heaven here on earth:

You see, “allelon” is the holy activity of heaven! In Scripture, the Trinity is often found one-anothering one another. We find Father, Son and Spirit:

- Encouraging one another (see Matt. 3:17)
- Supporting one another (see John 14:24)
- Loving one another (see Mark 9:7)
- Deferring to one another (see John 14:10)
- Glorifying one another (see John 17:1).

The fact is, the Triune God simply models what we're told to do for one another to the tune of forty-seven times in the New Testament.

And here is the obvious point: God modeled one-anothering for us; now He's called us to it.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You are at the core a relational God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a loving, serving, supporting eternal relationship. And since You modeled that for us, I now commit the rest of my life to being in loving, serving and supporting relationships with my spiritual family. Help me to keep that as a non-negotiable in my life.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What does the homesteader’s story tell you about the need for one another?
- What does treating one another the way Jesus asks us to show the world about Christianity? What does it do for you? What does it show God?
- Write about and talk about the three groups of “one-anothers” written about in this devotional.
- Where can you “one-another” this week?

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