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Refresh your Faith

A 47-Day Lenten Journey to Refresh your Faith and
Intimacy with God

Week 1: Be Intentional

1. Day 1: Make a Commitment
2. Day 2: Set Aside Time
3. Day 3: Take it One Step at a Time
4. Day 4: Create a Prayer Journal



Day 1: Make a Commitment

Before you do anything, put your trust totally in God and not in yourself. Then every plan you make will succeed. The Lord works everything together to accomplish his purpose.

— Proverbs 16:34

The observance of Lent began nearly 2,000 years ago as a way for believers to prepare their hearts and minds for the cross. It began as a time of fasting to honor Jesus's fasting for 40 days before he began his public ministry. While the fasting of food for these 40 days has seemingly gone by the wayside, the practice of fasting from something else has taken its place. Most people who observe Lent choose to give up something—typically a luxury, sometimes a bad habit they want to break anyway, but hopefully, always something that's absence is felt and seen as a sacrifice.

To be honest with you, I've never really been someone who has given up much at Lent. Instead, I've always viewed these 40 days as a time for growth, a deeper connection with my God, and a refresher for my faith. It looks different to me every year. Some years, I use a physical book, others I use a reading plan in an app, and some years I choose a section of the Psalms.

The goal is always the same, though—to refresh my faith and prepare my heart for the cross.

Proverbs 16:3-4 reminds us: *Before you do anything, put your trust totally in God and not in yourself. Then every plan you make will succeed. The Lord works everything together to accomplish his purpose.*

For some of you, committing to a 40-day devotional might seem easy. You study every day. You spend time in the bible every day. This might feel like it's just the next study for you, so this commitment might not seem that big to you. You are constantly refreshing your faith.

For some of you, though, committing to a 40-day devotional is a big commitment. It's more than you've ever committed to in terms of faith. For you, this might not be a refresher—it might be introducing you to a whole new faith.

Wherever you find yourself today, I encourage you to follow the advice from Proverbs to put your trust totally in god and not yourself. Place this commitment and the next 40 days in God's hands and pray that he will show you what he desperately wants you to see. Be intentional about this commitment.

Psalm 10:17 promises us that:

Yahweh, you have heard the desires of the humble and seen their hopes. You will hear their cries and encourage their hearts.

God knows your heart and your desires. Today, I pray your desire is to commit to refreshing your faith and preparing your heart for the cross for the next 40 days. God is faithful, and he will see you through this journey.

If you haven't printed out the journal that goes with this study, feel free to do that. Or, if you have a journal of your own you use, grab that and work through the discussion questions each day!

Reflection Questions

1. What do you look forward to the most about making this commitment for the next 40 days?
2. What are you apprehensive about relating to this 40-day commitment?
3. What is it that you are hoping to gain in terms of your faith?

Prayer:

— God, I come to you today with an open and humble heart. I pray that you would help me to prioritize my time with you over the next 40 days and keep my commitment to refresh my faith and prepare my heart for the cross. Even when Satan throws roadblocks and encourages my apathy and laziness, I pray that you would help me take the few minutes to read, connect, and reflect on you and your words.



Day 2: Set Aside Time

“How could you worship two gods at the same time? You will have to hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You can’t worship the true God while enslaved to the god of money!”

— *Matthew 6:24 TPT*

I love schedules and routines. I have a very specific schedule I stick to every morning for my own time.

- I get up.
- I make coffee.
- I sit down and drink my coffee, scroll through a little social media, and then read my devotion for the day
- I get on the treadmill.
- I make breakfast.
- I shower.
- I sit down at my desk to work.

The only variation of this comes on the weekends when I don't sit down at my desk to work at the end of my morning routine. During the week, my routine is even the same once I sit down at my desk to work. I have 3 or 4 things I do every morning before I start on the list on my calendar.

I am a creature of habit.

Sometimes I think it's easier for those of us who are schedule-keepers and creatures of habit to keep a set time for our quiet time, God time, devo time—whatever you want to call it. I also think it's easier for us who are habit-keepers to fall into a routine and complete that as a task to check off our to-do list.

Our focus this week is on being intentional, and I think that is so important when it comes to setting aside a quiet time for ourselves every day. We have to be intentional about both setting the time aside, but we also have to be intentional during that time so we aren't just checking off a box on our to-do list.

One of the scariest scriptures for me is Revelation 3:16. There is so much hope and grace and mercy in the character of God, but there is also jealousy. God does not want us to serve two masters (Matthew 6:24), and he absolutely hates it when we're lukewarm. John tells us in Revelations 3:16 that if we are neither hot nor cold, only Lukewarm, God will spit us out of his mouth.

Now, there are people who have written chapters and books all about what it looks like to be lukewarm, but I don't think we really need a full dissertation to explain to us the concept—lukewarm: neither hot nor cold. Don't get me wrong here, I'm not saying if your mind wanders during your devotions a couple of times that God is going to spit you out of his mouth. No. I have to wonder, though, if we are only setting aside time to read our bibles, study, and spend time with God to be able to check it off our to-do list if that isn't a sign that we are either lukewarm or heading toward being lukewarm.

I don't want to be lukewarm, and I don't want you to be lukewarm!

So, as you pray about setting aside time to study, pray, and grow closer to God for the next 40 days, I pray you do it intentionally and with focus.

Reflection Questions

1. When is the best time in your day for you to set aside a specific time to intentionally study and grow in your relationship with God?
2. What is your biggest obstacle to staying committed to keeping this time?
3. What are your concerns about being or becoming lukewarm?

Prayer:

— God, the last thing I want is to be lukewarm. Today, I am committing to setting this specific time for you every day for the next 38 days. I pray that you would prick my heart and help me to keep my commitment to growing and refreshing my faith in you during this Lenten Season. Help me to be intentional every day and to truly spend these few minutes completely focused on you.

Day 3: Take it One Step at a Time

First pride, then the crash— the bigger the ego, the harder the fall.

— *Proverbs 16:18*

I hate being bad at things. I understand that learning how to do new things takes time, practice, tweaking, refining, starting over, relearning, etc. I know that logically, but I hate actually having to go through that process and learning curve.

We used to have a joke in my house that I could cook anything except gravy. See, I've been cooking since I was young—like 5 or 6 young, young enough I probably shouldn't have been cooking. I learned to cook from women who didn't own cookbooks. For many years, I rarely used a cookbook for anything except baking—because chemistry.

Most things I could figure out on my own. Gravy, though, that was not one of them. I watched my grandma and my mom make gravy for years. They always made it look so easy, but whenever I tried to make it, it turned out disastrous.

Now, my mom doesn't cook because of her brain injury, and my grandma is 91 and just kicked cancer's butt.

You know what that means, right?

I had to master the art of gravy.

I caved.

I actually followed a recipe.

Guess what?

It worked.

Perfectly

Is it important that I can make gravy now? I would say not really, but the other members of my family would disagree.

The lesson here, though, is one about pride and process. It is unrealistic and, frankly, dangerous for us to go through life haphazardly, without taking things one step and one day at a time.

Proverbs 16:18 warns us that:

*First pride, then the crash—
the bigger the ego, the harder the fall.*

When we try to do everything all at once without taking the time to learn, to go through the process, and to grow through that process, we are risking a terribly hard fall.

Being intentional and developing our faith is no different.

We aren't going to have all the answers to begin with. We aren't going to do it perfectly. We're going to have days where we fail, days where we're weak, and days where we desperately need all the grace!

The important thing for us to remember here is that growing in relationship with God and refreshing our faith or finding fresh faith doesn't happen in the blink of an eye. It happens slowly, intentionally, and one day at a time.

If you've found yourself frustrated or feeling like you aren't doing enough or being enough, today is the day that stops for you! Today is the day you commit to not being perfect but being consistent! Today is the day you commit to not trying to do everything and doing nothing well, but instead, you commit to taking your relationship with God and your faith one day at a time, constantly putting one foot in front of the other.

Reflection Questions

1. When are the times when you feel like you aren't doing enough in your relationship with God or in refreshing your faith?
2. What is one thing you can do to remind yourself to take your relationship with God one day at a time?

Prayer:

— God, forgive me for the times when I want to run ahead and not trust your timing or your processes. Help me to remember that life is a marathon and not a sprint. Help me to remember that growth takes time and effort, and that can only happen if I remember to take things one day at a time and trust you. Thank you for your patience with me.

Day 4: Create a Prayer Journal

Don't be pulled in different directions or worried about a thing. Be saturated in prayer throughout each day, offering your faith-filled requests before God with overflowing gratitude. Tell him every detail of your life, then God's wonderful peace that transcends human understanding, will guard your heart and mind through Jesus Christ.

— Philippians 4:6-7

I can't even tell you how old I was when I began journaling. I remember my first journal, though. It was a precious moments journal with a lock on it, which would have been great had I not lost the key immediately in the abyss that was my bedroom.

It wasn't until I was much, much older that I learned about the benefits of keeping a prayer journal—at least that's what I call it. I'm sure there are other names. You can call it whatever your little heart desires!

I can read scripture or a devotional, think how nice it was, and then go about my day without much processing or application. If I'm being really honest, I have to admit that simply reading a little bit of scripture or taking 5-10 minutes to read through a devotion doesn't really stretch me all that much.

It's what I choose to do with that scripture and that devotion that affects me, my life, my faith, and my relationship with God. I have to be intentional about processing the information I've just read and talked to God about it.

This is where the prayer journal comes in.

I don't have a specific structure for my journal, but almost every day I include gratitude for the day and for the ways I've seen God working in my life and around me. I talk about what I learned in my scripture reading and devo and how it applies to my own world. Some days, I feel like all I do is dump all my stuff on God and dump all my loved ones' stuff on God. And that's okay. But, I end every day asking God to guide my day, to guide my mind and heart, my words, and everything I create.

It's during these times that I hear God the most.

It's during these times that I'm vulnerable with God.

It's during these times that I feel my intimacy with God growing and growing.

One of my absolute favorite scriptures is Philippians 4:6-7:

Don't be pulled in different directions or worried about a thing. Be saturated in prayer throughout each day, offering your faith-filled requests before God with overflowing gratitude. Tell him every detail of your life, then God's wonderful peace that transcends human understanding, will guard your heart and mind through Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, we associate God with this bearded, angry, old man in white robes sitting on his throne with lightning bolts in hand just waiting for us to screw up so he can smite us. There were times in the Old Testament when God did kind of seem to resemble that caricature. We see a different side of God throughout the New Testament, though.

We love and serve a God who wants us to tell him every detail of our lives. He wants to know the desires of our hearts, the longings of our souls. We aren't supposed to keep our requests quiet. He wants us to ask him for our desires in faith that He will honor them and with gratitude—not only for what he has already done but for what he is going to continue to do and to do in the future.

I struggle with these concepts if I don't take the time to sit down and put them into practice in my journal every morning. I have to be intentional in my desire to grow my relationship and my faith but also in the practice and application of that desire.

I want to encourage you to be intentional in your desire and action to grow your faith and relationship with God as well.

I know it can be scary to put your thoughts down on paper, but God already knows your thoughts and desires anyway, and I can assure you he isn't grading you—there's no rubric for this assignment.

This isn't about what your journal looks like, how neatly you write, or how expertly you put your words together.

No, this is about your heartfelt transparency before your God and your intentional decision to grow your faith in and with him.

It's my prayer that this will be a tool to help you process the information we're discussing and for you to create stronger intimacy and transparency with God.

If you have your own journaling system that you use and it's working, by all means, do that!!!

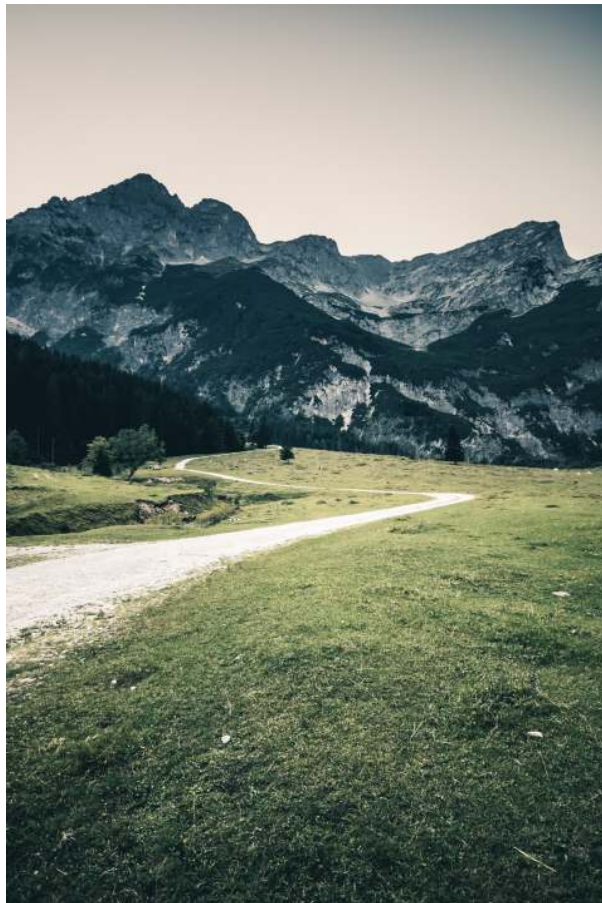
For the last few days, I've been encouraging you to download and use the FREE journal I included with this devotional. If you haven't already done so, I would encourage you to do so now, especially if you've never journaled like this before. For the last couple of days, I've kept the journal pretty simple, but starting today, I'm going to add all the categories I include in my own journal as well as the reflection questions.

Reflection Questions:

1. How often do you present your faith-filled requests to God?
2. How does it make you feel when you are constantly asking God for things?
3. What does showing gratitude toward God look like for you?
4. What is one thing you want to do better in terms of how you tell God all about your life?

Prayer:

– God, I come to you today and ask that you would guide me on this journey to create more intimacy with you and to grow my faith in and with you. I pray that you would help me read scripture and devotions and process them with you, that you would nudge me to be intentional in how I respond. Help me not to be lazy and simply read and walk away without ever talking to you about them or applying them. God, help me to be a person of gratitude. Help me to remember to notice what you are doing in my life and the lives of those around me every day and thank you for that. Lastly, help me never stop thanking you for all you've done in my life and all you are going to do in the future.



Week 2: Quieting the Chaos

1. Day 5: Identify the Chaos
2. Day 6: Don't be Pulled in different directions
3. Day 7: Focus on all that is authentic and real
4. Day 8: Focus on what is honorable and admirable
5. Day 9: Focus on what is beautiful and respectful
6. Day 10: Focus on what is pure and holy
7. Day 11: Focus on what is merciful and kind



Day 5: Identify the Chaos

A thief has only one thing in mind—he wants to steal, slaughter, and destroy. But I have come to give you everything in abundance, more than you expect—life in its fullness until you overflow!

— *John 10:10 (TPT)*

We live in a fast-paced world driven by the prospect of instant gratification. Somewhere along the way, our world bought into the idea that the busier we are, the better we are, the more we are doing, the more successful we are.

I spent so many years in that mindset and that rat race.

It wasn't until I was out of that world that I was able to clearly see the reality of what that life was doing to me physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

I have one word to describe that time: chaos.

I come back to this verse from John often:

A thief has only one thing in mind—he wants to steal, slaughter, and destroy. But I have come to give you everything in abundance, more than you expect—life in its fullness until you overflow! (John 10:10 TPT)

Spiritual warfare is no joke. I think sometimes we take it too lightly or even take it with a grain of salt. Maybe it's because we think it isn't something that affects our lives, or maybe because we can't physically see it happening. I can assure you of this, though—Satan is the thief who has only one thing on his mind: to steal, slaughter, and destroy.

Do you know what one of the easy, easy ways is for Satan to steal, slaughter, and destroy in our lives?

Chaos.

Think about what life is like when you are in the middle of chaos:

- Constantly running from one place to another
- Desperately trying to find time to accomplish even the simplest tasks
- Feeling like you are being pulled in all directions at the same time
- Struggling to keep your head on straight and your emotions in check
- Exhaustion
- Doing everything but nothing well

You might be sitting there thinking that these things are true, but you thrive on chaos.

I thought that too. At least, that's what I told myself and everyone else.

In reality, though, chaos wreaks havoc on your relationships with your family and friends, it keeps you from being still and sitting in God's presence, it spreads you so thin you aren't giving what you could be to family, work, God, relationships, etc.

You won't see it happen all at once, but slowly Satan uses the chaos to destroy you, your relationships, your commitments, your family, and everything that you hold dear.

Thankfully, this does not have to be your life. In fact, John reminds us at the end of this verse that this is absolutely not what God desires for us. He wants to give us everything in abundance, a fullness of life so amazing it is overflowing.

As you continue in this Lenten season to refresh your faith and prepare your heart for the cross, think about how you can identify and eliminate what is causing the chaos in your life. Living a life of chaos and attempting to be still in God's presence will constantly be in conflict with another because you are essentially attempting to serve two masters.

Today, I pray you take the first step toward eliminating chaos as your master and focus solely on your actual master and Father.

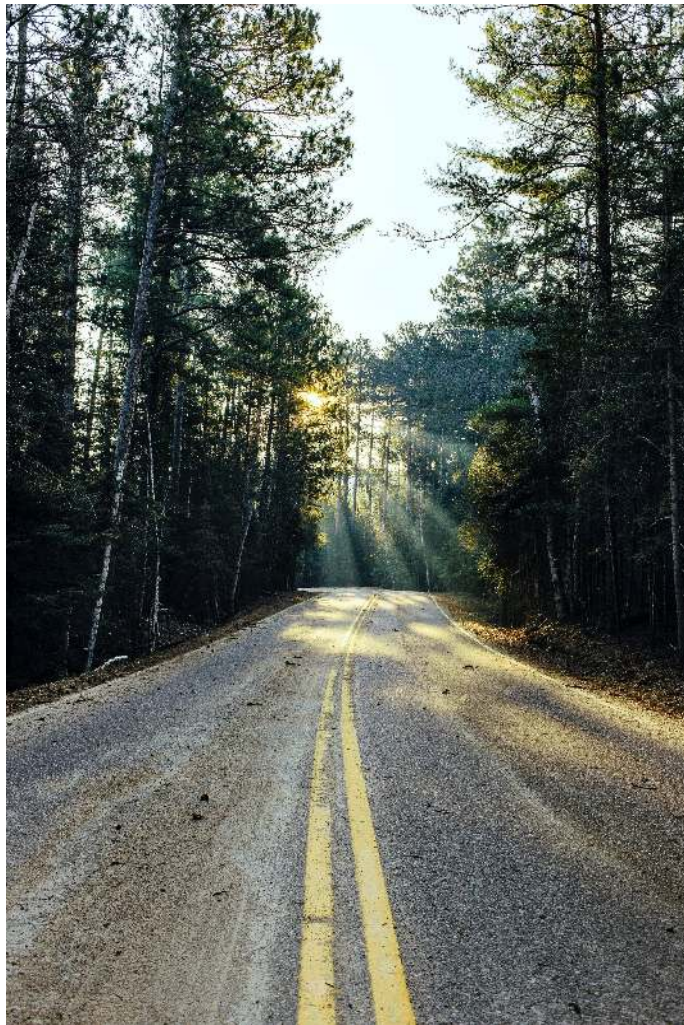
Remember that journal you printed out? Grab it! Take some time to reflect on today's scripture and devotion.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the areas in your life that are causing chaos?
2. How is the chaos in your life a hindrance to your faith and your relationship with God?
3. What is one thing you can do this week to begin to remove that chaos and be still with God?

Prayer

— God, life is crazy sometimes, and Satan is really good at sneaking in with all the chaos to distract me from you. Forgive me for the times when I've let the chaos and the busyness of life get in the way of my faith and my relationship with you. Help me to see the areas that I need to slow down in this week. Help me to identify the chaos in my life and show me how to work to eliminate it.



Day 6: Don't be Pulled in Different Directions

Be saturated in prayer throughout each day, offering your faith-filled requests before God with overflowing gratitude. Tell him every detail of your life, then God's wonderful peace that transcends human understanding, will guard your heart and mind through Jesus Christ.

— *Philippians 4:7*

I live in the Midwest, and somewhere between October and November, it gets cold and miserable here. Take right now, for example, I'm sitting in my office looking out the window. The sun is shining, the trees are moving a little in the breeze, and it looks like I should be able to walk out my back door and sit on my back porch for hours.

No.

That's not it all.

It's freezing out there.

You know what? If I had my druthers, I would park my butt in the house until Spring hits, not because I hate winter. In fact, I love to sit in my house and look at the snow. I think it's beautiful, but please don't ask me to go outside in it! No, I much prefer to be holed up inside my house, so much so, that there are times when we leave to go out on the weekends, and I realize I haven't actually left my house in days.

Now, my husband and I are both fortunate to work from home, so we have the opportunity to be able to stay home most days. There are other things that I have committed to doing to eliminate chaos in my life too, though. We live 30 minutes from a grocery store, so I make a menu every week, and we grocery shop after church on Sundays. We look at our schedule for the week at the beginning of every week, so we know what to expect and plan for in the upcoming week. Basically, we do as much prep work as we can to eliminate the chaos that can so quickly invade our lives.

Don't get me wrong, we don't avoid chaos altogether, but I definitely know we have taken steps to lessen it in our lives.

Have you started to think about the different aspects of your life that are causing chaos?

Even though I have committed to a much slower lifestyle, there are still times when I feel like I'm being pulled in a hundred different directions.



- We still have a teenage daughter who drives a car as old as she is (literally), so that causes unwanted stress at times.
- We're involved in small groups and a book study, so those are commitments we keep weekly.
- We have close friends we do dinner with once a week.
- We're still active in our church.
- We have parents in their 60's and 70's.
- My grandma is 91 (almost 92!). She just kicked cancer's butt and still lives alone! But, she has lots of doctor's appointments, and I am her taxi driver.
- My husband is a child of divorce, so for every holiday and birthday, we work to coordinate schedules and dinners with everyone separately.
- We have other relationships we try to nurture, and those take time as well.
- Oh, and we are still technically newlyweds, so there's that too!

I could go on, but I don't think I need to because, hopefully, you're starting to think about what it is in your life that pulls you in different directions too. Honestly, my list is minuscule compared to what my life used to look like.

This is important.

In Philippians 4:6, Paul tells us "*Don't be pulled in different directions or worried about a thing.*"

I'm going to be completely honest with you here—I think this is completely impossible on my own. There is no way I can ever achieve those two things on my own. I'm too human. That's why Paul's next sentence in this chapter is so important:

Be saturated in prayer throughout each day, offering your faith-filled requests before God with overflowing gratitude. Tell him every detail of your life, then God's wonderful peace that transcends human understanding, will guard your heart and mind through Jesus Christ (Philippians 4:7 TPT)

I don't think it's a coincidence that Paul follows up these commands to not be pulled in different directions or worry about a thing with the direction to be saturated in prayer, to offer our faith-filled requests to God, and to tell him every detail of our lives.

This is the only way to stop the pull from everywhere else and to ease the burden of worry on our minds.

The reward isn't just a calmer life and less anxiety, it's a peace that transcends human understanding.

I don't know about you, but that peace sounds pretty amazing to me.

This week, our focus is to quiet the chaos. Hopefully, by now you've started to think about the chaos that's separating you from God and the different directions life is pulling you in. My prayer for you today is that you can not only identify these things, but that you can present these to God in faith and begin to see how he helps you to start removing them from your life to allow you to be still before God and refresh your faith this week.

Hey! Hey! Grab that journal!

Reflection Questions

1. What are the main things in your life that are pulling you in different directions?
2. Which of these can you eliminate today?
3. Which of these do you need to offer to God in faith, asking him to help you remove them?
4. What is one strategy you can use to help you be saturated in prayer throughout your day?

Prayer

— God, I know there are so many different things in my life that are pulling me in a variety of different directions. I pray that you would help me see what I need to eliminate in my life and that you would lead me down the path to removing those things. God, I know that my life needs to be saturated in prayer, and I ask that you would nudge me throughout the day to help me remember that you want me to talk to you about all the details of my life. I love you, and I want to live a life that reflects my closeness to you and my faith.

Day 7: Focus on all that is authentic and real

Keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful, pure and holy, merciful and kind. And fasten your thoughts on every glorious work of God, praising him always.

— *Philippians 4:8*

The focus this week has been on quieting the chaos. I hope by now you have been able to really think about the things in your life that are causing chaos around you and come up with some realistic strategies to quiet that chaos in your life. It's very difficult to be still and focus on your faith and your relationship with God when you are engulfed in chaos in the world around you.

For the rest of the week, I want us to focus on quieting a different kind of chaos, the chaos that infiltrates our minds. We looked at Philippians 4:7, but Paul goes in Philippians 4:8 to say:

Keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful, pure and holy, merciful and kind. And fasten your thoughts on every glorious work of God, praising him always.

In this verse, Paul gives us 4 sets of things we should focus our minds on. We're going to look at one of those sets each day. Today, I want to talk about the first set, authentic and real.

At first glance, this might seem like an odd thing for Paul to tell us to keep our thoughts on. My gut reaction to this statement is “duh, of course I think about things that are authentic and real. What else am I going to think about?” But, if I actually take the time to process this, it becomes clear that isn't true. I absolutely do not always fix my mind on things that are real and authentic.

Think about it for a moment:

- How often do you walk away from a conversation and spend hours thinking about what the other person is probably thinking about you?
- How often do you spend sleepless nights conjecturing every worst-case scenario for a situation you are dealing with at home or work?
- How often do you obsess over something someone else said or did to you without even knowing or understanding their perspective, motives, or own life situations?
- How often do you look at social media posts and covet the carefully curated lives of other people?
- How often do you spend too much time carefully curating the image of your own life on social media?
- When someone asks you how you are, how often do you say “fine” instead of authentically answering the question?
- How often do you stress about the thought of losing your job or having something terrible happen to you or a family member?
- How often do you think about tragedies or traumas that haven't happened but might happen?

I'm guilty of these things too and more, if I'm being honest.

Paul was onto something here, though. We have to quiet the chaos in our minds of comparison, of conjecture, of worst case scenario if we truly want to still our minds enough to peacefully sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his voice.

So many of us are guilty of wasting so much time on what-ifs. We fail to focus on what we know is real and authentic for the sake of our wild imaginations running wild to all sorts of very dark places.

And, that, my friend, is one of Satan's famous strategies.

Those "what-if" thoughts aren't from God.

They are manipulated and planted by the father of lies himself.

When those thoughts come today, I encourage you to remind yourself that God is a God of victory, that whatever battle you are fighting in your mind isn't your battle to fight, it's God's battle to win. Instead of allowing yourself to be held captive by those negative what-ifs, identify it as a lie from Satan, and pray that God replaces that thought with what is real and authentic.

Before your mind spirals out of control, I pray God gives you the strength and wisdom to be able to stop your thoughts and ask him to reveal to you what is authentic and real so you can replace those lies and what-ifs with truths.

Grab your journal, and let's do a little reflecting.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the biggest way Satan attacks you with thoughts that aren't authentic and real?
2. When these thoughts start to enter your mind, what is one way you can combat them?
3. How do these chaotic thoughts affect you personally? Your faith? Your relationship with God?

Prayer

— *God, I know my thoughts aren't always on what is authentic and real. I know sometimes my mind wanders to all sorts of things that might happen, that could happen, that are what-ifs and worst-case scenarios. God, pray that you would help me to identify those thoughts as they start to happen so that you can help me redirect my mind to all the things that I know are authentic and real. God, I know those thoughts aren't from you. I know they are from Satan, and I give this battle to you. I know you have never lost a battle, and I am confident you won't lose this one.*

Day 8: Focus on what is honorable and admirable

Keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable...

— *Philippians 4:7*

I have been blessed with three incredibly strong grandmothers.

My Grandma Francis was my great-grandmother. She was a sassy, snarky, independent little Yugoslavian woman who immigrated to the United States when she was in her teens. She told stories of seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time and being given bananas at Ellis Island. She had never seen a banana before. She ate the peel and threw away the fruit. That pretty much sums up her personality! I wouldn't have encouraged anyone to mess with her. She would have destroyed them.

My Grandma O'Dell was the most kind-hearted, quietly wise, and endlessly patient woman I have ever met. She had a gift of compassion and empathy, and she quietly used this gift to write beautiful cards to everyone who just needed even the slightest bit of encouragement. She was married to the son of my Grandma Francis, so you can imagine the patience she needed to deal with that.

My Grandma Mary will be 92 next month. She is fiercely independent, still lives alone, loves God, and is the consummate survivor. My grandad was an alcoholic for the majority of my life, and while I never saw it firsthand, I have heard countless stories of what an angry drunk he was. I never saw that side of him. The side I saw was the side that would give the shirt off his back or the paycheck from his hand to anyone he thought needed it. And, he did that too. Yet, another reason my grandma is a survivor.

When I think of honorable and admirable, I think of these women, their resolve, their strength.

According to Webster, to be honorable means to be “worthy of honor” and to be admirable means “arousing or deserving respect and approval.”

Paul tells us to fix our thoughts on these things, things that are honorable and admirable, things that are worthy of honor and that arouse or deserve respect or approval.

Of all the things Paul tells us to focus on in this verse, I tend to think these two are the most difficult. You know what is not honorable or admirable—lying, cheating, gossiping, judging, criticizing, being unkind, etc... That list could go on and on.

What do all of these things have in common?

They create chaos in our minds that separates us from God.

- We concoct little white lies to our family, friends, and bosses because it's just easier than admitting the truth.
- We think about ways to cut corners at work.
- We read social media posts and immediately think how ridiculous they are and then send them to our friends to judge as well.
- We see someone at work, a restaurant, even church and wonder what the heck they were thinking putting on that outfit, or dating that person, or saying that comment.
- We have people we just don't like, and our thoughts run rampant through our minds in terrible ways.

I could go on and on, and the reason I could do that is because I do all of these things and more!

All of these situations originate in the same place—our minds. I have to think Paul understood the struggle that happens in our minds, and he understood the chaos this breeds and the separation it causes us from our creator.

We can't think terrible thoughts, thoughts that are dishonorable and less than admirable and at the same time be refreshing our faith and drawing closer to God.

Did that sting a little? Cause it stung me a little.

There's a reason I wanted to introduce you to my grandmothers. While their stories are stories are admirable stories of strength and inspiration, I could have chosen to focus on their husbands' stories of drunkenness, anger, and rage instead, stories that were neither worthy nor admirable.

We have the choice so many times throughout the day, heck even throughout the hour, to choose what we will focus our minds on—the things that are admirable and honorable or on the things that are the furthest from them. Our humanity makes it so hard to win this battle all the time, but I pray today that you will start to win these battles throughout the day in order to quiet this chaos and help you refresh your faith and draw closer to your loving Father.

Grab your journal, and let's spend some time with God today.

Reflection Questions

1. What are your biggest challenges when it comes to thinking about things that are honorable and admirable?
2. Where do you struggle the most with your thought-life? Home? Work? Church? The Ball field?
3. What is one reminder you can give yourself when you feel your mind start to travel down one of these paths?

Prayer:

— God, I know I am guilty of letting my thoughts get the better of me. I know there are so many times when they are not exactly honorable or admirable. I know I can't fix this all at once, but I pray that you will help prick my heart when my thoughts get out of control and head in the wrong direction. I want to be closer to you, and I know the chaos of my thoughts can get in the way of that. Help me to quiet the chaos, so I can connect with you more closely.

Day 9: Focus on what is Beautiful and Respectful

Keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful...

— *Philippians 4:7*

I grew up in the 80s and 90s—the Abercrombie and Fitch era of unhealthy and unrealistic body images. For those of you who were teenagers during this time, you probably remember the Abercrombie and Fitch catalog/magazine full of overly-sexualized, half-naked young folks falling over each other.

It was an interesting time.

On one hand, women had spent years fighting for equal rights, equal pay, and equal opportunity, but on the other hand, women were praised for their size 0 bodies, their ability to ingest fewer than 800 calories a day and not die, and their appearance.

Oh, and then let's not forget about purity culture and the very clear message from the church that it was a girl's responsibility to dress modestly so she wouldn't cause her weak Christian brother to lust and sin.

It's no wonder there are a whole slew of grown men and women walking around in our world today completely and utterly wrecked when it comes to their internal narratives.

Let's talk about that today.

Paul tells us to keep our minds fixed on what is beautiful and respectful. There are so, so many things that are beautiful in our world and that we could take our sweet time focusing on. This week, our goal is to quiet the chaos so that we can refresh our faith and grow closer to the Father. One of the most common ways our thoughts grow chaotic is through our internal dialogue and the narrative we tell ourselves about who we are.

We are our own worst critics, and too often the way we speak to ourselves and see ourselves is the epitome of this.

When was the last time you:

- Looked in a mirror and immediately saw your flaws?
- Talked negatively about yourself to your family or friends?
- Felt unattractive?
- Refused to accept a compliment?
- Felt unworthy?
- Went on another diet?
- Blamed yourself for someone's rejection of you?
- Thought "if I could only lose _____ lbs, I'd be happy"?
- Compared yourself to someone else?
- Envied a coworker's intelligence, confidence, etc.?
- Faked your own confidence?
- Refused to go somewhere because you didn't feel smart enough, attractive enough, likable enough?

These thoughts aren't just negative or the opposite of beautiful and respectful, they are toxic.

I had a reality check related to this very thing recently.

My family decided we all need to be a bit healthier in our lives. So, I did a bunch of research and chose a lifestyle plan that seemed to best fit our health needs. Two weeks in, I was complaining because I had only lost 4 lbs. Now, listen, I know how weight loss works, and I know what is healthy and sustainable, but I was fired up because my husband, whom I love, but who also eats what I offer him to eat and nonchalantly entered into this lifestyle lost 10. So, I was irritated. Like any good teenager, my 16-year-old promptly told me I was being annoying and needed to change my thought process.

That stung a little.

But, she was right.

First, I was focusing on all the wrong things. What I should have been focusing on was the fact that I was fueling my body exceptionally well, I was working out daily, and I was hydrating really well. Instead, I was focusing on my jealousy.

I don't know what that foothold is for you—weight, exercise, external validation, success at work, recognition at work, notoriety, athletic prowess, attaboys after a sermon, likes and comments on your social media...

I know this, though. Satan knows what that foothold is, and he is constantly fighting for it.

The only way for us to refuse Satan that foothold is to work on eliminating that way of thinking from our routines. When we talk to ourselves negatively, when we refuse to see that God has made us beautifully in his image—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, then we open ourselves up for Satan's attacks.

Instead, we need to heed Paul's advice here and speak to ourselves with respect. We need to see ourselves—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—as beautiful. Our thoughts have to reflect that beauty and that respect.

When we don't fill our thoughts with beautiful and respectful things about ourselves, we create the perfect environment for chaos in our minds and our lives. It's very difficult to worship God while you're speaking negatively about yourself and obsessing over those few pounds you want to lose or that promotion you got skipped over for at work.

Today, I hope you pay attention to your internal monologue. Are your thoughts about yourself beautiful and respectful or are they full of negativity and self-depravation?

If you find that you are more negative in your self-speak than positive, I pray you can replace those negative thoughts with beautiful thoughts.

Grab your journal, and let's spend some time reflecting.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is one area where you are highly critical of yourself?
2. When are the times you find yourself slipping into a negative self-view?
3. What are the habits or relationships you need to change to help you stop thinking this way?
4. When you find yourself starting to think negatively about yourself, how can you replace those thoughts with thoughts that are beautiful and respectful?

Prayer:

— God, I know that you created me in your own image. I know that you created me to be uniquely me. Help me to quiet my negative thoughts about myself. Help me to remember that you made me, you love me, you will always choose me. When negative thoughts start to take over, I pray that you would remind me of these things and help me to focus my thoughts on respectful thoughts about myself and beautiful thoughts.



Day 10: Focus on what is Pure and Holy

Keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful, pure and holy...

— Philippians 4:7

Our goal this week is to quiet this chaos, but in order to do that, we have to determine the different things that influence our thoughts. Sadly, sometimes this negative influence can come from the church itself.

Some of my earliest memories involve church. My preschool and early elementary school church memories are things like being in Dorothy Underwood's Sunday School class, potlucks in the church basement, creating the most elaborate crafts in VBS, singing special music, and being terrified when I had to play the piano.

My early memories are pure, holy, full of innocence and kindness—what you would expect church memories to be for someone that age.

My memories from the rest of my adolescence surrounding Sunday School and Sunday morning sermons are not as bright, or pure, or holy. I remember the day in fourth grade when I was in Sunday School and the teacher told us when we die, all our sins would be projected for everyone to see, so we better behave ourselves.

Or, there was the time that Sunday School teacher's brother told us that anyone who didn't attend the type of church we went to were going to hell. So, that was the day I mistakenly believed my Presbyterian friends were all doomed for the fires of hell.

Oh, and this one is my favorite and also the last time I ever attended a Sunday School class. This was the time my Sunday School teacher told us that he spanked his wife in discipline because it was biblical and necessary. Nope. I didn't even stay for the rest of that lesson. (They're divorced now, in case you were wondering).

We are inundated with information every minute of every day, and we have to be so careful about the type of information we consume. That information influences us, it influences our thoughts, and it eventually influences our actions.

This happens both in the church and outside of the church. If we aren't careful, these kinds of influences can wreak havoc on our minds and instigate chaos both in our minds in our lives in general.

If we are going to be diligent about keeping our thoughts pure and holy, then we have to be diligent about who and what is influencing those thoughts.

I have said this before, and I will say it again and again—not all churches are created equally! If you are sitting through small groups, church services, and Sunday School classes and your heart is pricked and your mind is on edge because of the information being presented, then there is likely a problem. If you are walking out of a service or class, and you aren't left with feelings that are pure and holy, something is probably askew. Seek wise counsel. Seek biblical support. Get to the bottom of the issue, and if you continue to feel this way, get out.

Hopefully, your church isn't toxic and spiritually abusive and nothing you've read this far applies to you!

The church isn't the only place where our thoughts can shift from things that are pure and holy to nothing that is pure and holy, though. We live in a world obsessed with instant gratification. In fact, we hold devices in our hands every day that can easily be the catalyst for our thoughts being overrun by things that are very much not pure and holy. Within seconds, we have access to:

- Fuel for our addictions like gambling, porn, alcohol, drugs
- Horrible forms of entertainment
- Temptations to connect with strangers
- Opportunities to comment and interact negatively on social media
- Binge-watching shows that numb our minds
- Images, movies, social media that we know will cause us to lust
- An escape from our real lives

Within seconds, our minds can be filled with information and entertainment that is the furthest thing from pure and holy. Before we know it, we have wasted an exceptional amount of time, money, relationships, etc on these thoughts and experiences.

I think that's exactly what Satan wants out of us.

It's nearly impossible to refresh your faith or grow closer to God while you are engaged in any of these activities and while your mind is focused on these things that are the opposite of pure and holy.

It requires a change of habit to not be drawn in by these temptations. It requires purposefully choosing to fill the time you would normally spend on these things with other, quality things.

Maybe you could:

1. Read a book
2. Play board games with your family
3. Go outside
4. Take up hiking, biking, some activity outside
5. Communicate with your partner/family
6. Spend time with friends
7. Learn a new hobby

It has become such a normal part of our lives to look at the small screen in front of us that we have to teach ourselves a new normal and remove the temptation from our lives.

Today, I hope you take stock of how you are spending your time and what you are filling your mind with that is not pure and holy. I pray that you identify your problem areas, the areas that are causing chaos in your mind, and that you start to think through how to eliminate those things from your routine.

Grab your journal, and let's spend some time with God.



Reflection Questions:

1. What, if any, ways do you see toxicity in your church?
2. What are the temptations/influences in your life that cause your thoughts to be less than holy and pure?
3. What is one action step you can take to eliminate those things from your life?

Prayer

— God, I want my mind to focus on what is pure and holy. I want to think about the things you want me to think about and continually grow in my faith and my relationship with you. I know I am guilty of being distracted by certain things that pull me away from you and from pure and holy thoughts. I pray when that starts to happen that you would prick my heart and help me to refocus my mind.



Day 11: Focus on what is Merciful and Kind

Keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful, pure and holy, merciful and kind.

— *Philippians 4:7*

Parenting teenagers is fun. The older they get, the more their personalities really start to shine through, and we get to see the best and worst of who they are, and sometimes, the best and worst of who we are. One thing I've learned about my 16 yr old Kate, over the last several years is that she is possibly the most stubborn human being on the planet when it comes to people who have wronged her. She can hold a grudge like no other.

Now, as her mom, there's part of me that cheers her on because I don't want her to be a doormat or to be taken advantage of in life, but, there's also that other part of me who prays that while she's stubborn, she also is growing to understand grace, mercy, undeserved kindness, and empathy. We've had endless conversations about this, I can assure you.



I don't think it's just our teenagers who we need to have this conversation with, though. If we're being honest, many times we're the ones who need to have that conversation with ourselves. For example, I am a consummate reader. I hate being uneducated. So, that means that when I read a ton of articles about random stuff. In fact, I've evidently said "I read an article about that the other day" so many times it's now a running joke between Kate and her friends. What can I say? I like to know stuff! Anyway, I struggle immensely with people who choose not to educate themselves. Do you know where people excel the most at showing the extent of their lack of effort to educate themselves? Social Media—especially Facebook groups. I know what I should do—stop joining Facebook groups. That would solve this whole issue for me. But, no. I join them, and then I am constantly irritated with the ignorant questions people ask and the even more ignorant responses people provide to these people.

My thoughts are neither merciful nor kind.

At all.

They typically involve things like "moron," "seriously, do you even read," and "find another hobby" because I just can't.

Like I said, not merciful or kind.

When I start fuming, my loving, apparently perfect child likes to ask me if that's what Jesus would do. No, no Kate, it isn't. But, Jesus didn't have social media, so I should get a pass!

I realize that's a less-than-serious example of how our thoughts can easily be less than merciful and kind, but I do think this is a serious issue, and I believe this is an issue we all deal with because we all have things and people in our lives who get under our last skin and hang out right there on our last nerve. For example, maybe you have:

- A coworker who does everything in their power to undermine you
- A narcissistic ex who spews venom about you to your children
- The one volunteer in your ministry who never follows through on anything
- The band member who is always 15 minutes late and never has their music organized
- A coworker who constantly tries to outdo you
- A partner who invalidates your feelings and turns them back on you
- A parent who tries to dictate your life path
- A sibling who is absent and leaves all responsibility on you
- A frienemy who says passive-aggressive comments about everything you do

These things are infuriating, and they have the potential to drive you absolutely crazy, and not because you are praying about them and for them. No, these drive us crazy because we obsess over them, we let our minds unravel, and the chaos creeps into our thoughts and annihilates our peace.

Right now, I'm sure you're sitting there thinking about the people or situations that steal your peace and are the catalyst for your negative, unmerciful, and maybe even hateful, thoughts.

I know I am.

The question here is what can we do to help quiet the chaos these situations contribute to in our minds. How can we do what Paul said and focus on things that are merciful and kind when we really want to throat punch someone?

This doesn't happen overnight.

It takes us retraining our brains.

When I'm in one of these situations or have one of these encounters, my mind plays it over and over again, I obsess over what I want to say to that person or how I want to address the issue, then I squirrel to all the reasons that person is awful and horrible, and by the end of my mental rant, I have annihilated them, their family, their families' family, the car they drive, their house...you get the idea. Not super merciful or kind.

What's important for us here is to acknowledge the feelings these people and these situations make us feel. It's the age old therapeutic practice of acknowledging that "when_____ does _____, it makes me feel _____.

Where I get stuck in this is what happens next. I've acknowledged my feelings, but what do I do with them? How do I move from that feeling of hurt, anger, frustration, or even hatred to mercy and kindness?

I can tell you it does not come naturally for us in our humanity.

First, we have to acknowledge the humanity of this person. They are flawed, just like we are.

Then, we have to recognize that everyone behaves the way they do because they get the reaction they want. If they weren't getting that reaction, they would change their behavior. Like I said, flawed humans.

Finally, we have to recognize that person is damaged. They have been hurt too. They have lived life too. We have to understand that we don't always understand why they are acting the way they are, but they certainly have a reason.

We are never going to change that person or their behavior. The only thing we control in these situations is our own reaction. Herein lies the challenge. We have a choice at this point—are we going to allow our minds to respond with pure evil, or are we going to purposefully think kind and merciful thoughts?

It's our choice. We are in control of our minds.

Some of the situations you face that cause you to think unkind and unmerciful thoughts might require action. They might require counseling. They might require you to leave. They might require you to have a difficult conversation with that person. If you are in one of those situations or relationships, then I pray that you seek professional help from a licensed professional.

For the rest of us, though, we have to make the conscious choice to show mercy and kindness where we want to show anger and hatred.

It's what Jesus would do (thanks Kate).

And, it's really hard.

Because people are really hard.

Today, I hope that as you encounter these difficult situations and people that you remember these are broken humans who, with issues and flaws. In recognizing that, I pray that you can quiet the chaos and work to keep your thought life under control and out of chaos.

Grab your journal, and let's spend some time reflecting.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the situations or who are the people who cause your mind to spiral into thoughts of anger, frustration, and even hate?
2. What is it about those people and situations that really drive you crazy?
3. When you think about these individuals, what are they getting out of acting this way?
4. What is one strategy you can use to start replacing your thoughts of anger, frustration, and hate with mercy and kindness?

Prayer

— God, I know I'm a flawed human who doesn't always do this thing called life perfectly. Help me to remember that every single person I encounter on a daily basis is the same-flawed. God, help me to be able to identify what it is about these people and these situations that are causing my mind to unravel so that I can get my thoughts under control, refresh my faith, and grow closer to you. I know I'm not going to get it right all the time, but help me to make mercy and kindness my innate response instead of hatred and anger with these people and situations.



Week 3: Pray Like David

1. Day 12: Be Honest
2. Day 13: Focus on WHO God is
3. Day 14: Focus on WHAT God's done
4. Day 15: Thank God for what he WILL do
5. Day 16: Don't Hide your Emotions
6. Day 17: Believe in the Impossible
7. Day 18: Ask for it!



Day 12: Be Honest

Yahweh, don't condemn me. Don't punish me in your fiery anger.

2 Please deal gently with me, Yahweh; show me mercy, for I'm sick and frail and weak. Heal me, Yahweh, for I'm falling apart.

3 My soul is so troubled; but you, Yahweh—how long?

— *Psalm 6:1-3*

Throughout my entire adolescence, my family attended the same church with very rigid traditions. One of these traditions included communion at the same time in the service every Sunday. The elders and deacons, all men (because Fundamentalism) would ceremoniously rise from their seats and assemble at the front of the church where the deacons would take their places in the holy of holies—the first pew, and the elders would find their spots in the ornate throne-esque chairs on either side of the ginormous wooden communion table that looked suspiciously like an altar, but whatever. Then, as if on cue, one of the elders would pray. Each elder had a different style, but the thing that I still remember was this one old man who, literally, prayed the same prayer every time it was his turn to pray.

Seriously

Word for word.

I was in high school, and my friends and I would recite this communion prayer for fun!

So, listen, I didn't know this guy's heart, and I can't tell you if he was afraid of public speaking or this was just the prayer that God was telling him to pray...repeatedly. Be assured there was a healthy amount of "thees," "thous," and "thys" in this prayer as well.

Who talks like that?

No, really, who talks like that?

If you don't talk like that in real life, then why are you talking to God like that?

Did that one give you pause?

I've talked a bit about my church history and the fact that I grew up in a super-conservative, overly legalistic, fundamentalist evangelical church. Remember the parable of the two men who went to the temple to pray? Luke records it in chapter 9: 9-14.



Jesus taught this parable to those who were convinced they were morally upright and to those who trusted in their own virtue yet looked down on others with disgust: "Two men who went into the temple to pray. One was a proud religious leader, the other a despised tax collector. The religious leader stood apart from the others and prayed, 'How I thank you, O God, that I'm not wicked like everyone else. They're cheaters, swindlers, and crooks—like that tax collector over there. God, you know that I never cheat or commit adultery; I fast from food twice a week and I give you a tenth of all I earn.' "The tax collector stood alone in a corner, away from the Holy Place, and covered his face in his hands, feeling that he was unworthy even to look up to God. Beating his breast, he sobbed with brokenness and tears saying, 'God, please, in your mercy and because of the blood sacrifice, forgive me, for I am nothing but the most miserable of all sinners!' "Which one of them left for home that day reconciled to God? The humble tax collector, not the religious leader! For everyone who praises himself will one day be publicly humiliated, and everyone who humbles himself will one day be publicly honored and lifted up."

If I had to sum up my childhood examples of prayer in the church, it would not be anything close to the humble tax collector, praying for God's mercy in his brokenness in the corner.

I didn't have good early examples of prayer. This is something I learned much later in life. Thankfully, God gives us amazing examples of prayer in scripture, and my favorite role model for prayer is David. It wasn't until I read through the Psalms in a very focused way that I actually started praying honestly and openly. Maybe this is something you already have mastered, but, if not, I hope this week is eye-opening for you and changes the entire way you communicate with God, after all, he is your father.

This week, I want us to really spend time focusing on our prayer lives. Hopefully, last week allowed you to quiet the chaos around you and in your mind in order to allow you to focus a little more clearly on who God is, refreshing your faith, and growing closer to him.

One of the hallmarks of any healthy relationship is honesty. It only makes sense then that if we want to have a healthy relationship with God, we have to be honest with God. We've already talked about Paul's direction in Philippians 4, telling us to be saturated in prayer and to bring all of our faith-filled requests to God, while also telling him every detail of our lives.

Those things require honesty.



When was the last time you told God:

- Man, this situation really stinks
- I really can't stand that person
- I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing
- I love my partner, but I don't really like them much today
- I feel like the walls are caving in around me
- I'm just winging it here and have no idea what I'm doing
- This grief is completely overwhelming
- I think I need to end this friendship

To be completely honest here, I think those of us who grew up in the church struggle with this more than those of us who didn't. For some reason, whether stated or unstated, we were conditioned to whitewash our prayers. I think most of that comes from this unfortunate teaching and belief that if we are honest with God about our feelings and our lives, we are somehow doubting his goodness or forgetting the blessings God has given us. If we are honest in prayer, then, we have to follow it up with some statement acknowledging that we haven't forgotten God's goodness or the good things he is doing in our lives too.

There is room in our prayers for both of those things, though.

I mentioned David earlier, so I want to take a minute and look at one of his prayers. In Psalm 6, David prays:

A Cry for Healing

For the Pure and Shining One

A song for stringed instruments, for the new day by King David

How Long?

1 Yahweh, don't condemn me. Don't punish me in your fiery anger.

2 Please deal gently with me, Yahweh; show me mercy, for I'm sick and frail and weak. Heal me, Yahweh, for I'm falling apart.

3 My soul is so troubled; but you, Yahweh—how long?

Return to Me

4 Yahweh, turn to me and rescue my life

because I know your faithful love will never fail me.

5 In the darkness of death who remembers your name in worship?

How could I bring you praise if I'm buried in a tomb?

Extreme Anguish

6 I'm worn out with my weeping and groaning.

Night after night I soak my pillow with tears,

and flood my bed with weeping.

7 My eyes of faith won't focus anymore, for sorrow fills my heart.

There are so many enemies who come against me!

He Heard My Cry

8 Turn from me, all you troublemakers!

For Yahweh has turned to hear the sound of my weeping.

9 Yes! Yahweh my healer has heard all my pleading

and has taken hold of my prayers and answered them all.

10 Now it's my enemies who have been shamed.

Terror-stricken, they will turn back again,

David doesn't pull any punches in his prayers. He doesn't whitewash or sugarcoat his misery, anguish, weak faith, fear—none of it. He cries out to God, begging for help and deliverance. He recognizes how dire his situation is, but he also recognizes that God is the only rescuer he has—he just doesn't know how long he is going to have to wait for God's rescue.

When was the last time you cried out to God with that much honesty?

I hope today you can focus on being honest with God, you heed Paul's advice and tell God all about your day—honestly, and you don't hesitate to bring all your requests to God in faith.

Grab your journals.



Reflection Questions

1. How would you rate your honesty with God on a scale from 1-10?
2. If you didn't give yourself a 10, why do you think you struggle to be completely honest with God?
3. What is one thing you can take to God in prayer that you haven't been completely honest about?

Prayer

— God, I come to you today with an open heart and an open mind. I know there are times when I haven't been as honest with you as I should be. I know I struggle to live a life completely saturated in prayer. God, I want that to change. I want to live my days talking to you about every detail of my life. I know you are God, and you are good, and you are faithful. Help me to always remember that when I am talking to you and to not hesitate to bring my faith-filled requests to you every day.



Day 13: Focus on WHO God is

1 With my whole heart, with my whole life, and with my innermost being, I bow in wonder and love before you, the holy God!

— *Psalm 103:1*

I was teaching middle school folks one evening and had them draw pictures of what they thought God looked like. This is an age-old lesson about who God is, but for some reason the results are typically still the same.

I don't know if everyone has just watched too much Percy Jackson or what, but it never fails that the majority of pictures look like Zeus on his throne—some with and some without lightning bolts.

On the surface, this seems funny, but if you really stop and think about it, this is so sad and scary. I don't know about you, but the thought of having a loving relationship with Zeus is just not super high on my priority list.

The thing is, if this is the image our kids have of God, how many of us subconsciously have that same image?

Our goal during our time together is to refresh our faith, to grow closer to our Father, and to prepare our hearts for our remembrance of Jesus's death and resurrection. In order for us to really do those things, we have to truly understand WHO God is, and we have to focus our honest prayers on WHO God is as well.

David's prayers do just this. Not only is he incredibly honest about his life, desires, fears, grief, etc, but he is also constantly aware of exactly who God is and what he is capable of. Take Psalm 103: 1-18, for example. I've highlighted the different characteristics of WHO God is.

Our Father's Love

King David's song of praise

*1 With my whole heart, with my whole life,
and with my innermost being,
I bow in wonder and love before you, the **holy God!***

*2 Yahweh, you are my soul's celebration.
How could I ever forget the **miracles of kindness**
you've done for me?*

*3 You kissed my heart with **forgiveness**, in spite of all I've done.
You've **healed** me inside and out from every disease.*

*4 You've **rescued** me from hell and saved my life.
You've crowned me with **love and mercy**.*

*5 You **satisfy** my every desire with good things.
You've **supercharged my life** so that I soar again
like a flying eagle in the sky!*

*6 You're a God who makes things right,
giving **justice** to the defenseless.*

7 You unveiled to Moses your plans
and showed Israel's sons what you could do.

8 Lord, you're so **kind and tenderhearted**
and so **patient** with people who fail you!
Your **love is like a flooding river**
overflowing its banks with kindness.

9 **You don't look at us only to find our faults,**
just so that you can hold a grudge against us.

10 You may **discipline** us for our many sins,
but never as much as we really deserve.
Nor do you get even with us for what we've done.

11 **Higher than the highest heavens—**
that's how high your tender mercy extends!
Greater than the grandeur of heaven above
is the **greatness of your loyal love**, towering over all
who fear you and bow down before you!

12 **Farther than from a sunrise to a sunset—**
that's how far you've removed our guilt from us.

13 The same way a **loving father** feels toward his children—
that's but a sample of your **tender feelings** toward us,
your beloved children, who live in awe of you.

14 *You know all about us, inside and out.*

You are mindful that we're made from dust.

15 *Our days are so few, and our momentary beauty
so swiftly fades away!*

16 *Then all of a sudden we're gone,
like grass clippings blown away in a gust of wind,
taken away to our appointment with death,
leaving nothing to show that we were here.*

17 *But Lord, your **endless love** stretches
from one eternity to the other,
unbroken and unrelenting toward those who fear you
and those who bow facedown in awe before you.
Your **faithfulness** to keep every gracious promise you've made
passes from parents, to children, to grandchildren, and beyond.*

18 *You are **faithful** to all those who follow your ways
and keep your word.*



In these 18 sentences of his prayer, David recognizes these characteristics of WHO God is–

- Holy
- Miraculous
- Kind
- Forgiving
- Healer
- Rescuer
- Loving
- Merciful
- Satisfier
- Supercharger
- Just
- Kind
- Tenderhearted
- Patient
- Loving
- Not fault-finding
- Discipliner
- Giver of Tender Mercy
- Loyal
- Guilt-Remover
- Loving Father
- Tender
- All-Knowing
- Endlessly Loving
- Faithful

It is so easy to get caught up on what we want God to do for us that we forget who God is to us. We see situations, but we fail to see WHO God is and how has endless solutions for our situations. Today, I hope you can both be honest with God about every detail of your life, but I also hope you can pick a couple characteristics of WHO God is to incorporate into your prayers as well.

Think about:

- The times God has healed and restored you in the past
- The situations God has worked out for you before
- The forgiveness God has offered you freely
- The times God has said no but you understand now he was protecting you
- The gift of sunrises and sunsets
- The blessings of your loved ones
- The time God has given you with cherished individuals
- The battles God has fought and won for you in the past

Incorporate those things in your prayers today.

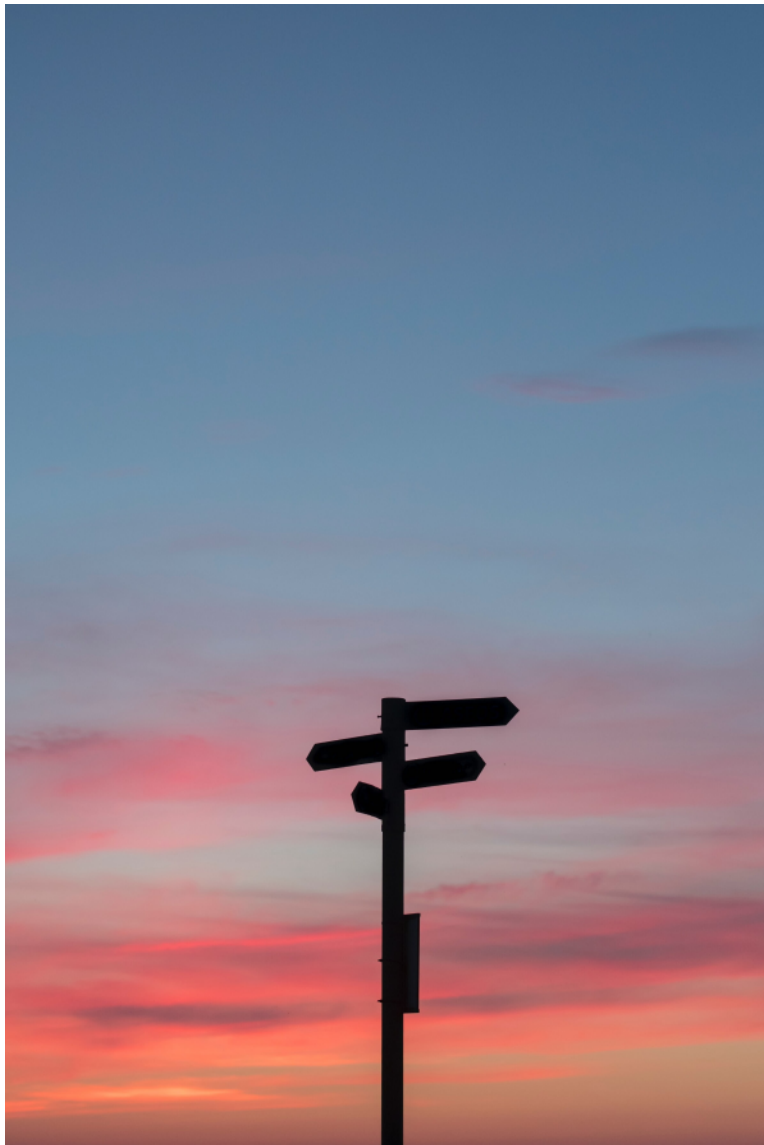
Grab your journal and let's spend a few minutes reflecting.

Reflection Question

1. Think about David's list of WHO God is. Make your own list of the ways God has shown WHO he is to you.
2. What are a couple of situations in your life where you know God has worked?
3. Write out your prayer today, including praise for WHO God is specifically and how he has worked in your life specifically.

Prayer

— God, sometimes I have to admit that I forget to focus on the amazing nature of WHO you are. I forget the incredible love, mercy, grace, and faithfulness you have continually shown me throughout my life. God, I am trying to be more honest with you in my prayer life, but I also want to be more grateful of WHO you are. Remind of those things throughout my day today, God.



Day 14: Focus on WHAT God's done

2 When I was in deep distress, in my day of trouble, I reached out for you with hands stretched out to heaven. Over and over I kept looking for you, God, but your comforting grace was nowhere to be found.

— *Psalm 77:2*

One of the things I love about David's prayers is how he can lay his heart open before God in all of his desperation and honestly beg God for deliverance, but in the end, David consistently returns his focus to gratitude for who God is and awe for what God has done in the past.

While it is clear from the words of Paul in Philippians that God wants us to be honest, to share every detail of our lives, and to come to him with our faith-filled requests, it is also clear that our attitude needs to consistently be one of praise. This section of Philippians 4 ends with Paul reminding us to fasten our thoughts on every glorious work of God, praising him always.



Not sometimes.

Not when things are going really well in our lives.

Not when we're happy.

Always.

Eek.

This isn't just good advice from Paul. Instead, this is really the crux of our relationships with God. We can all talk about our lives to God. We are experts at asking God to help and deliver us. This final part, though, this part where we shift our thinking from ourselves and our own situations to the praise of God and recognition of what he has already done can be really challenging when we are facing difficult and trying situations.

When your Goliath is standing in front of you and all you have to fight him is a slingshot and a few stones, it becomes very difficult to focus on anything other than Goliath.

That isn't how God wants us to view our battles, though.

God doesn't want us to focus on our Goliath at all.

God wants us to focus on him, what he's done, and who he is. And, he wants us to continually offer him praise and gratitude.

David understood that.

In Psalm 77, David writes:

*1 I poured out my complaint to you, God.
I lifted up my voice, shouting out for your help.*

*2 When I was in deep distress, in my day of trouble,
I reached out for you with hands stretched out to heaven.
Over and over I kept looking for you, God,
but your comforting grace was nowhere to be found.*

*3 As I thought of you I moaned, "God, where are you?" I
'm overwhelmed with despair as I wait for your help to arrive.*

Pause in his presence

*4 I can't get a wink of sleep until you come and comfort me.
Now I'm too burdened to even pray!*

*5 My mind wandered, thinking of days gone by—
the years long since passed.*

*6 Then I remembered the worship songs I used to sing
in the night seasons,
and my heart began to fill again with thoughts of you.
So my spirit went out once more in search of you.*

*7 Would you really walk off and leave me forever, my Lord God?
Won't you show me your kind favor, delighting in me again?*

8 Has your well of sweet mercy dried up?

Will your promises never come true?

9 Have you somehow forgotten to show me love?

Are you so angry that you've

closed your heart of compassion toward me?

Pause in his presence

10 Lord, what wounds me most is that it's somehow my fault that

you've changed your heart toward me

and I no longer see the years of the Mighty One

or your right hand of power.

11 Yet I could never forget all your miracles, my God,

as I remember all your wonders of old.

12 I ponder all you've done, Lord,

musing on all your miracles.

13 It's here in your presence, in your sanctuary,

where I learn more of your ways,

for holiness is revealed in everything you do.

Lord, you're the one and only, the great and glorious God!

14 Your display of wonders, miracles, and power

makes the nations acknowledge you.

*15 By your glory-bursts you've rescued us over and over.
Just ask the sons of Jacob
or the sons of Joseph, and they will tell you!
And all of us, your beloved ones, know that it's true!*

Pause in his presence

*16 When the many waters of the Red Sea took one look at you,
they were afraid and ran away to hide—
trembling to its depths!*

*17 Storm clouds filled with water high in the skies; cloudbursts and thunderclaps
announced your approach.
Lightning-flashes lit up the landscape.*

*18 Rolling whirlwinds exploded with sonic booms of thunder,
rumbling as the skies shouted out your story
with light and sound and wind.
Everything on earth shook and trembled as you drew near.*

*19 Your steps formed a highway through the seas
with footprints on a pathway no one even knew was there.*

*20 You led your people forward by your loving hand, blessed by the leadership of
Moses and Aaron.*

In the first five verses of this psalm, David is honestly crying out to God for rescue, but in verse six, his tone shifts as he begins to remember worship songs that reminded him of who God is and what God had already done. At this point, he searches his own heart to attempt to determine why God isn't acting and isn't answering David's pleading for rescue.

Finally, though, David's tone shifts completely as he pauses to remember in detail how God has offered rescue in the past. For half of his prayer, David praises God for his miracles of deliverance and rescue in specific detail, naming them one by one.

It would have been really easy for David to just end his prayer around verse 10—when he is suffering in desperation, feeling alone, and feeling abandoned by God. He didn't do that, though, and God doesn't want us to do that either. When we stop there, we are focusing on our Goliath instead of our God.

No, God wants us to continuously remember all he has done and who he is, especially when we are facing trials, trauma, and strife. He doesn't want us to stop our prayers after we have cried out to him about our rescue and our feelings of abandonment. He wants us to remember who he is and what he has specifically done in our lives in the past. He wants us to remember these things and never lose faith in his character or his promises.

It's easy to do this when things are going well for us, but it's in those times of trial that it is especially important.

Today, I hope you can start to incorporate what God has done for you in the past and who God is into your prayer life. I hope you can remember that while God wants us to tell him everything about our lives and come to him with our faith-filled requests, he also wants us to remember what he has done and praise him always.

Grab your journal and spend some time reflecting.



Reflection Questions

1. One thing David did throughout his prayers is list specifically what God had done for him and his ancestors. Think about what God has already done for you and your loved ones and make a list.
2. What is one Goliath you're facing today?
3. How can you shift your prayer from focusing on your Goliath to focusing on God and his past faithfulness?

Prayer

— God, it's easy for me to talk about my life and ask you for help, but I don't always think about praising you for what you have already done in my life. When I'm in the middle of asking you for help, please nudge me to remember who you are and what you have done for me in the past. Help me to focus my prayers on both what I need and also what you have done. Help me to never lose hope in you and your promises by consistently praising you.



Day 15: Thank God for what he WILL do

1-2 God, my God, come and save me! These floods of trouble have risen higher and higher. The water is up to my neck! I'm sinking into the mud with no place to stand, and I'm about to drown in this storm.

— *Psalm 69:1-2*

When I was going through my divorce, I was leading a book study on Joyce Meyers' "Battlefield of the Mind." In it, she talks about thanking God today for what he is going to do tomorrow. I had never thought about this or how I could put this into practice in my own life. I loved the idea because it took the focus of my prayer life off my Goliath and placed it on God in a very different way than I had ever experienced before.

This isn't just a concept Joyce Meyer thought up on her own. This same concept is seen in David's prayers as well. In Psalm 69, David spends the first 12 verses lamenting his dire situation and pouring out to God all the details of his mistreatment by his enemies.



1-2 God, my God, come and save me!

These floods of trouble have risen higher and higher.

The water is up to my neck! I'm sinking into the mud with no place to stand, and I'm about to drown in this storm.

3 I'm weary, exhausted with weeping.

*My throat is dry, my voice is gone, my eyes are swollen with sorrow,
and I'm waiting for you, God, to come through for me.*

4 I can't even count all those who hate me for no reason.

*Many influential men want me silenced,
yet I've done nothing against them.*

Must I restore what I never took away?

5 God, my life is an open book to you.

You know every sin I've ever done.

For nothing within me is hidden from your sight!

6 Lord Yahweh of Angel Armies,

*keep me from ever being a stumbling block to others,
to those who love you.*

Lord God of Israel, don't let what happens to me

be the source of confusion to those who are passionate for you.

7 Because of my love for you, Lord,

I have been mocked, cursed, and disgraced.

*8 Even my own brothers, those of my family,
act as though they don't want anything to do with me.*

*9 My love for you has my heart on fire!
My passion for your house consumes me!
Nothing will turn me away,
even though I endure all the insults of those who insult you.*

*10 When they see me seeking for more of you with weeping and fasting,
they all just scoff and scorn at my passion.*

*11 When I humble myself with sorrow over my sin,
it gives them a reason to mock me even more.*

*12 The leaders, the influential ones—how they scorn my passion for you!
I've become the talk of the town, the theme of drunkards' songs.*

I don't know about you, but whenever I read these Psalms where David needs to be rescued, I am promptly reminded that my life could be much worse!

As is typical for David's prayers, about halfway through he shifts his focus and his tone. In this prayer especially, David spends the rest praising God for what he will ultimately do in the situation:

*13 But I keep calling out to you, Yahweh!
I know you will bend down to listen to me,
for now is the season of favor.
Because of your faithful love for me,
your answer to my prayer will be my sure salvation.*

*14 Pull me out of this mess! Don't let me sink!
Rescue me from those who hate me and from all this trouble I'm in!*

*15 Don't let this flood drown me.
Save me from these deep waters
or I'll go down to the pit of destruction.*

*16-17 Oh, Lord God, answer my prayers!
I need to see your tender kindness, your grace,
your compassion, and your constant love.
Just let me see your face, and turn your heart toward me.
Come running quickly to your servant.
In this deep distress, come and answer my prayer.*

*18 Come closer as a friend and redeem me.
Set me free so my enemies cannot say that you are powerless.*

*19 See how they dishonor me in shame and disgrace?
You know, Lord, what I'm going through, and you see it all.*

*20 I'm heartsick and heartbroken by it all.
Their contempt has crushed my soul.
I looked for sympathy and compassion
but found only empty stares.*

*21 I was hungry and they gave me bitter food.
I was thirsty and they offered me vinegar.*

22 Let their "feasts" turn to ashes.

Let their "peace and security" become their downfall.

23 Make them blind as bats, groping in the dark.

Let them be feeble, trembling continually.

24-25 Pour out your fury on them all!

Consume them with the fire of your anger!

Burn down the walled palace where they live!

Leave them homeless and desolate!

*26 For they come against the one you yourself have struck,
and they scorn the pain of those you've pierced.*

27 Pile on them the guilt of their sins.

Don't let them ever go free.

28 Leave them out of your list of the living!

Blot them out of your Book of Life!

Never name them as your own!

29 I am burdened and broken by this pain.

When your miracle rescue comes to me,

it will lift me to the highest place.

30 Then my song will be a burst of praise to you.

My glory-shouts will make your fame even more glorious

to all who hear my praises!

*31 For I know, Yahweh, that my praises mean more to you
than all my gifts and sacrifices.*

*32 All who seek you will see God do this for them,
and they'll overflow with gladness.
Let this revive your hearts, all you lovers of God!*

*33 For Yahweh does listen to the poor and needy
and will not abandon his prisoners of love.*

*34 Let all the universe praise him!
The high heavens and everyone on earth, praise him!
Let the oceans deep, with everything in them, keep it up!*

*35 God will come to save his Zion-people.
God will build up his cities of Judah,
for there his people will live in peace.*

*36 All their children will inherit the land,
and the lovers of his name will live there safe and secure.*

Throughout this whole section of his prayer, David demonstrates an immense faith in what God is going to do to his enemies. While he does tend to go on a bit of a rant about specifically what he would like to see God do to them, he has an unwavering faith and praise for the rescue he knows is coming. In verse 13, he shows he has no doubt that God will rescue him. He is confident of the salvation that is coming. Then, at the end of this prayer, again, David states emphatically that God will come to save his people. Their children will inherit the land.

That's the faith that David prays with, and it's the faith we need to pray with as well.

Throughout this time, my desire for you is that you will refresh your own faith, draw closer to God, and prepare your heart for the upcoming remembrance of Jesus's death and resurrection. It takes immense faith to pray as David prayed, and my hope is that you will begin confidently praying in this manner.

After studying this section in "Battlefield of the Mind," I felt compelled to begin praying like this. I needed visual reminders, though. I made notecards where I specifically stated these situations God would resolve. Then, I hung them on my mirror in my bathroom, and every time I saw them, I thanked God for how he already knew how he was going to fight and win those individual battles. As God moved and won them, I took them off my mirror until I had no remaining notecards.

Today, I encourage you to choose at least one situation God will intervene in for you and you start thanking him every day for what he will do in that situation.

Grab your journal and let's reflect.



Reflection Questions

1. What are the situations in your life right now that you are waiting for God to intervene in?
2. Find some post-its or note cards or even write them out right here in statements that show your faith in what God will do in those situations. For example: God, I know you will provide me with the new job that you want me to have.
3. How comfortable are you praying these types of prayers?

Prayer

— God, I know you are faithful. I know you are good. I know you will always keep your promises to me and that means you will always provide for me and protect me. God, help me to pray with that confidence, knowing that you will do all the things you have said you will do.



Day 16: Don't Hide your Emotions

**I'm hurting, Lord—will you forget me forever?
How much longer, Lord? Will you look the other
way when I'm in need?**

— *Psalm 13:1*

Growing up, I was a tomboy. I had no interest in Barbies, dress-up, cheerleading, or anything else that could be considered at all "girly." I much preferred matchbox cars, creek-walking, motorcycles, go-carts, football, and dirt. I hated dresses, and I didn't wear make-up until I was an adult!

I never fit any of the stereotypes we assign to girls. I much preferred my independence. I had a voice and never faltered in using it. My biggest pet peeves were being weak and emotional.

It doesn't take a therapist to tell you how unhealthy those last two things can be.

We didn't exactly validate emotions in my house. We were more the "stuff 'em down as far as you can and ignore them forever" kind of people.

Do you know what happens when you stuff your emotions down as far as you can? Eventually, there's no room for stuffing any longer, and a ginormous explosion of years of emotions happens.

Those are fun.

Insert sarcasm here

After my explosion of 38 years of emotions, I took a vastly different path in life as far as emotional health and relational health is concerned. Thank God.

It wasn't just my physical, earthly relationships that I had to assess and change, though. It was my prayer life and relationship with God as well.

I think by now you probably have a pretty good of the type of church I grew up in and the way it shaped my early views of God and Christianity. I was never taught to talk to God about my emotions or even to convey any type of emotion when talking to God.

Like any healthy relationship, though, I've come to realize that expressing my emotions to God is paramount to building a genuine relationship with him. Building an intimate relationship with God requires honesty, not only about my life, but also about my emotions.

Just like it was hard for me to be emotionally honest with my relationships with my family and friends, it was equally as hard for me to be honest about my emotions with God.

For me, my biggest hurdle was feeling like I was ungrateful or lacked faith when I was honest with my emotions with God. For some reason, I couldn't make myself believe and understand that God already knew those emotions I was feeling anyway. He already knew my struggles. But, he wanted me to voice them to him.

It took me time.

This week, our focus has been on praying like David. We've already talked about the importance of being honest, recognizing who God is, what he has done, and what he will do. Today, though, I want us to really process what it looks like to truly bare our hearts to our Creator.

Reading the psalms and hearing David's gut-wrenching cries to God is what helped me truly understand what emotional honesty looks like. We see this throughout so many psalms.

We see this in Psalm 13. In just the first two verses, David says:

1 I'm hurting, Lord—will you forget me forever?

How much longer, Lord?

Will you look the other way when I'm in need?

2 How much longer must I cling to this constant grief?

I've endured this shaking of my soul.

So how much longer will my enemy have the upper hand?

In just these two verses, David expresses his hurt, his grief, and his feelings of abandonment. He is desperate for God's intervention in this situation.

When I read these words of David, I don't see a man talking to an authority figure; I see a broken man honestly crying to someone he deeply loves and trusts and someone who loves him as well. There is an honesty and intimacy in David's words that always make me feel a little like a voyeur when I read them because I feel like I'm invading his private thoughts and feelings.

They are deeply personal.

They are 100% genuine.

There is intimacy in them.

I have to ask myself when was the last time my prayers looked like this?

When was the last time I was so personal, genuine, and intimate with God that anyone hearing or reading my prayer would feel like they were intruding on an intimate conversation between two people who deeply love and trust one another?

Whatever it is that is standing between you and your ability to be deeply honest and intimate with God, I pray it begins to crumble today. I pray that your faith is freshened up a bit today and that your relationship with your Father grows a little deeper today.

Grab your journal, and let's spend a little time processing.

Reflection Questions

1. On a scale of 1-10, how emotionally honest are you with God?
2. Why do you think that is? Are there walls hindering you from being emotionally honest and vulnerable with God?
3. What are three emotions you need to lay at the feet of Jesus today?

Prayer

— God, it is hard to be emotionally honest. It's hard to be vulnerable and to pour out my heart before you. I know it's your desire that I am vulnerable and honest in my prayers. God, help me to be more like David today. Help me be honest and to really talk to you with the trust and intimacy that you desire from me.



Day 17: Believe in the Impossible

2 O Lord, my healing God, I cried out for a miracle and you healed me!

3 You brought me back from the brink of death, from the depths below.

— *Psalm 30:2-3*

One of my favorite parts of my week is Sunday Morning Worship. I love it when the lights dim, the world disappears, and it's just me in communion with God.

There are so many songs that are anthems for different times in my life. One that stands out to me the most is Elevation Worship's "Do it Again." The verse and chorus of the song all talk about God's faithfulness and how he has never failed me yet. But, it's the bridge that gets me every time.

I've seen you move.

You move the mountains.

And, I believe, I'll see you do it again.

You made a way

where there was no way.

And I believe

I'll see you do it again.

I'm at a point in my life where I have, in fact, seen God move several mountains that truly seemed immovable. When I sing this song, it represents absolute truth to me.

It isn't just on Sunday mornings during worship that this should be my song, though. My prayers and chats with God should illustrate my belief in God's ability and willingness to do what seems impossible to me on a daily basis.

This is another aspect of David's prayers that I am in awe of and haven't mastered yet. David has complete faith in God's ability to do the impossible, but he also has complete belief that God will do the impossible.

In Psalm 30:2-3, David says:

*2 O Lord, my healing God,
I cried out for a miracle and you healed me!*

*3 You brought me back from the brink of death,
from the depths below.*

Now here I am, alive and well, fully restored!

Then, later in the psalm (verses 10-11), he says:

*So hear me now, Lord; show me your famous mercy.
O God, be my Savior and rescue me!*

*11 Then he broke through and transformed all my wailing
into a whirling dance of ecstatic praise!*

*He has torn the veil and lifted from me
the sad heaviness of mourning.*

He wrapped me in the glory-garments of gladness.

David talks about how he prayed for a miracle, and God provided the miracle of healing for him. Later, he prayed again for God's mercy and rescue from an impossible situation, and God broke through and transformed him once again.

There is no shortage of faith or gratitude here on David's part.

Throughout this study, it has been my desire that you grow in your faith and your relationship with your God. The ultimate pinnacle of faith is believing that God is not only capable of the impossible but believing that he will do the impossible.

Our human brains and desire for logic are our biggest obstacles here. We are trained to believe in logic and to see things realistically, but God is a God who defies logic. Our brains have a hard time comprehending him.

One of my favorite verses, and one I have to remind myself of frequently is in Ephesians 4. Paul writes in verse 20:

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

When my human brain, the logical part of my brain starts to convince me that something is impossible, I have to turn back to this verse to be reminded that God can do anything—far more than my logical human brain can imagine and more than I can ever come up with, even in my wildest dreams.

The only thing that is impossible in this situation is my own human ability to understand the extensive power of God and his will.

It makes me ask how things might change if we started praying in faith that God will accomplish the things we deem impossible in our human minds. What might happen if we started praying and believing with the faith of David?

That's our challenge for the day, and the challenge for our prayer lives in the future—to pray the seemingly impossible and believe God will fulfill that request.

Grab your journal, and let's start working on those prayers.

Reflection Questions

1. What is one impossible thing you need to believe God will bring to fruition?
2. What has been holding you back from praying God will do that thing?

Prayer

— God, I know you are capable of achieving the impossible, but I struggle with the faith that you will do the impossible for me and in my life. God, I pray that you would help me to have the faith of David. I pray that you would help me to remember that you can do exceedingly, abundantly more than I could ever ask or imagine. Help me to remember that when I start to doubt and when my human brain starts to limit your abilities.



Day 18: Ask for it!

**17 Every evening I will explain my need to him.
Every morning I will move my soul toward him.**

— *Psalm 55:17*

When I was a kid, I hated to ask for things.

I've tried to psychoanalyze myself to figure out why I had this fear, and I still can't come up with any good reasons. I had loving parents who supported me and always provided what I needed while doing their best to give me what I wanted as well.

I've been reading about my Enneagram type (1w2), and the more I learn about my personality, that's the best explanation for my absolute innate inability to ask for anything! I say "ask" for anything because this isn't an aspect of my personality that I've simply grown out of as I have matured.

Nope.

It's still here.

You can ask my husband or daughter!

This hasn't just invaded my home life and friendships, it is absolutely a giant obstacle in my prayer life as well.

I hate asking God for hard things for myself.

It doesn't bother me to ask God for hard things for other people. That comes naturally to me, but I feel greedy, needy, and unworthy when it comes to asking God for the hard things for myself.

Can you relate?

Earlier this week, I talked about the notecards I wrote out and hung on my mirror. While that was a fantastic exercise in faith for me, as I think about the things I wrote on those notecards and prayed for, most of those things were more for Kate than for me. They were things I needed to happen in my divorce to make her life easier.

In fact, as I really think about this, there is only one major thing I put on a notecard on my mirror—and that was the name of my husband! Yeah, he made it to a notecard! (And see how that worked out?!?!)

David wasn't afraid to ask God for things. In fact, he begged God for rescue from his enemies repeatedly. Actually, he even went further and begged God to destroy his enemies.

Just to be clear, I'm not encouraging you to pray for the destruction of your enemies, but I do want us to take a closer look at how David didn't hesitate to ask God for what he wanted. Here is his prayer from Psalm 55:8-11:

*8 I will hurry off to hide in the higher place,
into my shelter, safe from this raging storm and tempest.*

*9 God, confuse them until they quarrel with themselves.
Destroy them with their own violent strife and slander.
They have divided the city with their discord.*

*10 Though they patrol the walls night and day against invaders,
the real danger is within the city—
the misery and strife in the hearts of its people.*

*11 Murder is in their midst.
Wherever you turn, you find trouble and ruin.*

David had no shortage of specifics in his prayers to God when it came to his enemies—and really any situation he found himself in.

Then, in verses 17-19, David goes on to show his faith in God's deliverance.

*17 Every evening I will explain my need to him.
Every morning I will move my soul toward him.*

*18 Though many wish to fight and the tide of battle turns against me,
by your power I will be safe and secure;
peace will be my portion.*

*19 God himself will hear me!
God-Enthroned through everlasting ages,
the God of unchanging faithfulness—
he will put them in their place,
all those who refuse to love and revere him!*

David not only brought his specific requests to God, he believed in faith that God would hear him and honor his requests.

Our focus this week has been on praying like David, and I really think this is the culmination of that act—asking God for what we need and having faith he will honor our requests—not just for other people, but for our own lives as well.

David wasn't selfish, needy, or greedy for asking God for these things.

Instead, he was honest and genuine. He didn't hide his heart from God, but instead, he made it transparent to God.

When I think about intimacy in my marriage, this is what I think of—honestly baring my heart and soul to my husband in order to be completely transparent.

Our relationship with God should be just that—transparent.

Today, as you enter your prayer and reflection time, I hope you begin to feel comfortable baring your heart and soul to your Father in complete transparency.



Reflection Questions

1. When you made your notecards this week, how many of those notecards were for your own needs or desires?
2. What are you trying to hold on to yourself and solve instead of laying it at the feet of Jesus and being transparent with God about it?
3. Make at least two more notecards that are solely about your wants and desires.

Prayer

— God, it's my human nature to hold onto the deepest darkest depths of my soul, but starting today, I want to lay those things at the feet of Jesus and be transparent with you, just like David was transparent. God, I know you already know my heart, but I want to be honest with you about it when we talk. Help me to remember that nothing is impossible for you.



Week 4: Hear God's Voice

1. Day 19: Be Still.
2. Day 20: Be Ready
3. Day 21: Find the Thin Places
4. Day 22: Believe God is Faithful
5. Day 23: Listen, but not with your Ears
6. Day 24: Pay Attention (Music, people, etc)
7. Day 25: Name it!



Day 19: Be Still.

Surrender your anxiety. Be still and realize that I am God. I am God above all the nations, and I am exalted throughout the whole earth.

— *Psalm 46:10*

Family dynamics are fun.

They're especially fun as you get older, have taken one too many psychology classes, and start to be able to identify all sorts of things about your own family!

I grew up in a very stereotypical Mid-Western family. There were four of us—my mom and dad, my brother, and me. My mom was a stay-at-home mom until I went to school. Then, she went back to college for her education degree. My dad was a drywall-contractor who my mom forced to go to college to get a degree he never used before she would marry him. But, that's a story for another therapy session.

As time has progressed, I've picked up on the idiosyncrasies of my family dynamic. There are two of us who are content anywhere with anything. Then, there are two of us who are never settled, and are constantly looking for something else—the next job, the next pair of shoes, the next house, etc.

For these two, stillness is unfamiliar, an abstract concept, the antithesis of who they are.

This week, we're going to spend our time talking about hearing God's voice because being able to identify and discern God's voice is paramount to refreshing our faith and growing closer to God.

I get on my soapbox about how busy our world is often, probably too often. This busyness and the lack of contentment that comes with it are enormous obstacles when it comes to hearing God's voice. I have said it once, and I will say it a million more times before I die, I'm sure—Busyness is Satan's favorite playground.

There are so many reasons why we live stupidly busy lives:

- Work hours are insane
- Our kids are in too many activities
- We don't know how to say no
- We're overcommitted
- Our families are needy
- We don't know how to not be busy

When we are so busy, and when we struggle to have contentment in all areas of our lives, it is impossible for us to be still.

I 100% know that God is the God of the impossible, but that doesn't mean we have to make it impossible for him to get through to us.

In Psalm 46:10, David writes:

Surrender your anxiety. Be still and realize that I am God. I am God above all the nations, and I am exalted throughout the whole earth.

We're going to talk more about worry and anxiety next week, but today I want to focus on that second sentence. David uses two words that seem so simple, yet can be so difficult for us—be still. Then, he reminds us that in our stillness we need to remember that God is God.

While I believe God can and does speak to us in other ways, God has historically spoken in a whisper, or still, small, voice.

Think about what it takes for us to hear a whisper.

We have to quiet and still our entire being.

I love this story from I Kings where God speaks to Elijah this way.

A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before God, but God wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but God wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper. (I Kings 19:12)

We've probably all heard this verse before.

God wasn't in the hurricane, the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. He created all those things. He put all those things into motion. His voice, though, only came after those, and it came as a whisper.

The part of the story I want you to think about for a minute is Elijah's situation here. The Israelites had abandoned God and their covenant (again). They destroyed all their places of worship, and they killed all the prophets. Elijah was the only one left, and they were after him to destroy him as well.

There was nothing happening in Elijah's life at this point that lent itself to peace, quiet, stillness, or contentment. In fact, Elijah probably felt like that hurricane, earthquake, wind, and fire were much more fitting to the whirlwind of chaos and trauma he was experiencing.

God didn't speak in the chaos, though.

He spoke once Elijah had endured and then escaped from the chaos, allowing the stillness and quiet to settle in.

I think that's a good lesson for us all to learn.

When we are in what feels like hopeless situations or we are just so busy it feels impossible to slow down, we have to find the place where we can quiet the chaos in order to be still. It's then that we can hear God's whispers.

For Elijah, that place was a cave on a mountaintop, a mountaintop he had to walk 40 days to get to.

It took Elijah complete separation and a 40-day journey to arrive at a place where he could hear God's voice.

Today, as you think about being still and hearing God's voice, I hope you think about what Elijah went through to find his quiet.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you need to have quiet and stillness in your own world today?
2. Elijah traveled 40 days and 40 nights to separate himself and arrive at Mt. Horeb. Is there separation you need in your life in order to have peace and find stillness?
3. What is keeping you from contentment in your life?

Prayer

— God, I want to hear your voice. I want my prayers to be more than just me talking to you. Help me to see the things in my life I need to give up or separate from in order to have peace and stillness in my life. God, help me to clearly see the things that are causing me discontentment and chaos. Help me to eliminate those things in my life and find contentment in you so that I can hear your voice.

Day 20. Be Ready

God spoke to Moses in a burning bush to declare the Israelites would be delivered

I have some seriously odd stories about God speaking to me and nudging me. Probably the most odd encounter I've had with God is a story I've told too many times to count. If you've known me long or read any of my other work, you've probably already heard this story.

It involves the waiting room of my daughter's counseling appointment, my ex-husband, and God telling me to offer to mow his yard—much to my dismay.

He said no.

Thank you, Jesus.

But still. Super weird God moment.

I've had other moments that were much more understandable. There are times when I'm in conversation or texting with a friend or family member, and God will place a thought in my mind and heart that I 100% know are not my own—typically wisdom that I'm confident I don't possess on my own. When that happens, I am honest about it and tell the person God wants me to tell you this!

There are times too when people come to me for advice or explanation. Sometimes I have the knowledge or experience of my own, but when I don't, I have to seek God's guidance and wisdom, and He always provides.

I would love to tell you that God's voice is always the loudest voice I hear, but that's not true. God's voice is only the loudest for me when my heart and mind are aligned with his—when I'm in a place to be able to hear and discern his voice.

That's not always the case.

I'm stubborn.

I get busy.

I'm driven.

I get distracted.

There are so many aspects of my life and my personality that can be obstacles blocking my ability to hear God's voice. I have to consciously choose to be in God's presence and to have my heart in the right condition if I want to hear God's voice and follow his commands.

I was thinking about the different people in the bible who had encounters with God and Jesus. It's a really interesting list.



- God spoke to Moses in a burning bush to declare the Israelites would be delivered
- Elijah was running for his life when God spoke to him in the whisper
- Jonah was being called to save the people he hated most
- The Woman at the Well encountered Jesus in the heat of the day when she was avoiding the other women because of her shame over her five marriages
- The woman who was dragged out of her house during her adulterous affair encountered Jesus in the middle of her sin
- Zacheus's entire life was changed by the mere presence of Jesus in his town and then his house

The presence of Jesus is enough to rescue us from the direst of situations, and the voice of God is louder than all the chaos around us if we are willing to hear it.

When it comes to refreshing our faith and growing in our relationship with God, we need to think about the condition of our hearts and if they are in a place where they are able to hear God's voice. No healthy relationship is one-way relationship, and our relationship with God is no different.

Today, I hope you take the time to think about the condition of your heart and any obstacle in your life that might be keeping you from hearing God's voice or discerning the voice of God.

Reflection Questions

1. When was the last time you heard God's voice clearly in your life?
2. What obstacles might be interfering with your ability to hear God's voice in your life?
3. What is one step you can take today to begin removing those obstacles from your life?

Prayer

— God, I love you, and I want to be able to hear and discern your voice. Help me to see the obstacles in my life that are keeping me from hearing your voice. Help me to see how to remove those obstacles so I can hear you more clearly.

Day 21: Find the Thin Places

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

Source: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Peace-To-You>

— *John 14:27*

Have you ever been in a place and immediately felt God's presence there—almost like the veil between heaven and earth was just a little thinner there?

I've heard different people talk about these places they've encountered in their own lives. Many times, when I hear people tell these stories, they talk about mountaintops, of feeling like they can reach out and touch the clouds, of feeling the overwhelming presence of God in these places.

These are the thin places.

Thin places look different for each of us. For some of us, thin places are certainly mountaintops. For others, though, these thin places might be sitting on a beach at sunset, hiking through a forest in the early morning hours when the only sounds to be heard are those of the animals who reside there, walking in the summer rain, overlooking the trees as the leaves change from their summer to fall colors, sitting around a campfire on a quiet fall evening.

A couple of my thin places include mountaintops—the top of Sargeant Mountain in Acadia National Park and the highest points on the Devil's Garden Trail in Arches National Park. Other thin places for me don't include mountaintops. I am drawn to water. I love the ocean. I feel at home there. Sitting on a beach with my toes in the sand watching the enormity of the waves is a thin place for me, and even being on a beach as a storm rolls in can be a thin place for me.

One thing I've noticed about thin places in my life is that they are most obvious to me when I'm traveling, and I think that's because when I'm traveling, my mind and heart are lighter. They are more open to God's presence because I'm not stressing about the everyday burdens of life. I have space for God.

My goal has been to make more room for God in my daily life and recognize the thin spaces around me in the everyday. I really think that's the key to closeness to God and opening our hearts to hear God's voice. There are really thin places around me every day that I can experience if I quiet the chaos and open my heart to God's presence in the ordinary. I feel God's presence in:

- The sunset I watch off my back porch
- The snow that blankets the ground and the trees in the winter
- The laughter from around the dinner table
- The quiet of the early morning before anyone else is up
- The serenity of the fire in the fireplace
- The notes from the piano
- The banter between my daughter and her step-dad
- The love between a grandfather and his granddaughter
-

The love between a grandfather and his granddaughter

The thin places have been here all along. I've just been too busy and too preoccupied to see them.

Sometimes, God's voice isn't wisdom, advice, or an edict to do something. No, sometimes, God's voice is truly the whisper that says, "I've got this. Look what I've done for you. Peace be with you."

Too often, when we talk about hearing God's voice, we talk about big things—big prophecy, big directions, big moves. We forget about the peace and closeness God gives us in the mountaintop experiences and also in the everyday thin places.

Today, I hope you think about the miraculous and awe-inspiring thin places you have experienced in your life, as well as the thin places you have in your everyday life.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the miraculous thin places you have experienced?
2. Describe what those experiences were like for you.
3. What are the everyday thin places you experience?
4. How can you spend more time in those places?

Prayer

— God, Thank you for the miraculous thin places I've experienced in my life. Help to open my eyes and my soul to those awe-inspiring places. God, help me to pay attention to the thin places that are around me in the every day and the ordinary. Help me to take advantage of those places to be able to hear your voice and find peace in your presence.



Day 22: Believe God's Faithful

“For those who listen with open hearts will receive more revelation. But those who don't listen with open hearts will lose what little they think they have!”

— Mark 4:25

I was sitting in a small group not too long ago. It was an eclectic mix of folks—some were new to the church and new to Jesus, some had grown up in the church, some had left the church years ago due to church hurt and just found their way to a church where they felt safe, some were recovering addicts, and some were bikers trying to find their way to truly accepting the grace of God.

It was great!

One of the folks who had grown up in the church and served in church their whole life spoke up and said they didn't believe they'd ever heard God's voice.

I was surprised, to say the least.

It really made me think.

How many people are sitting in our churches, in our small groups, in our outreaches who don't believe they have ever heard God's voice?

Honestly, probably too many.

I've thought about this quite a bit.

I think there are different reasons for why this happens, but I think the root of this phenomenon is one thing, and one thing only—Satan's voice.

We, humans, have this propensity for allowing Satan's voice to get in our heads without even realizing we are doing it. John 8:44 (NIV) reminds us that:

He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

That isn't all, though. John goes on to explain Satan in 10:10 (AMP):

Be sober [well balanced and self-disciplined], be alert and cautious at all times. That enemy of yours, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion [fiercely hungry], seeking someone to devour.

Satan is a liar, the father of all lies to be exact, and he prowls around like a fiercely hungry lion looking for someone to devour. While I wish we were all safe from this lion, the reality is that even the most devout Christian can fall into Satan's crosshairs.

I think this inability to hear God's voice or the belief that we haven't heard God's voice is a lie of Satan, it's an attack by the lion who wants nothing more than to devour us.

Satan plays on all our insecurities. He fills our heads with thoughts that we are unworthy, that we are unqualified, that we have too much sin in our lives or in our pasts, that we aren't good enough, that we are imposters, that we are failures...

Does this sound familiar?

Those thoughts, the thoughts that make you feel incapable and unworthy to hear the voice of God, aren't thoughts from your Father. They are thoughts from the father of lies.

If you have been reading this week and constantly have that nagging feeling that you can't hear God and will never hear God's voice, I see you. I hear you.

I'm here today to tell you that those are all lies.

Hearing the voice of God is not a miracle reserved for saints.

Hearing the voice of God is a gift to all of us.

Mark records the words of Jesus in 4:25:

"For those who listen with open hearts will receive more revelation. But those who don't listen with open hearts will lose what little they think they have!"

Earlier this week, we talked about obstacles in your life that might be standing between you and hearing God's voice. One of the major obstacles is Satan's voice filling our heads. Jesus wants us to have open hearts, but how can we have open hearts if our hearts are deflated by the lies of Satan? If we don't dispel those lies, our hearts will continue to be deflated or filled with lies, and they will never actually be open to hearing God's voice and receiving more revelation.

Here's what I think is really cool about Jesus's parables here—he doesn't reserve them for the high and mighty. There isn't a prerequisite in this verse where Jesus says we can only have open hearts and receive his revelation if we are perfect, or holy, or ministers, or priests. No, Jesus offers this gift of revelation to everyone who opens their hearts to it.

If you are struggling to hear God's voice today, I pray you take some time to figure out what lies of Satan are affecting you. What lies of Satan are causing you to feel deflated and unworthy or incapable of hearing God's voice and receiving the revelation that comes with that?

We know that we have to believe that Jesus is Christ, but sometimes I think we forget that we need to believe that God is God too. He is a God who has never broken a promise, who loves restoration and rewriting our stories—your story.

So, today, if you are struggling with how God could ever want to speak to you or if you are struggling to understand why God would ever choose you, I pray you can quiet those lies and truly open your heart to hearing God's voice this week.



Reflection Questions

1. What lies of Satan are standing between you and your ability to hear God's voice?
2. Today, quiet the lies of Satan by actively telling Satan that you know he is a liar and you aren't going to believe his lies any longer.
3. When Satan starts to fill your head with doubt, write out one affirmation you can repeat to yourself to remind you who God says you are.

Prayer

— God, I know that I am yours. I know that the lies that fill my head are from Satan and that he is the father of lies. I pray that you will remind me daily, hourly if I need it, that you call me your child and that you have set me apart and want to speak to me. I know you want to reveal your revelations to me, and I'm sorry I have let Satan win some of these battles in my mind.



Day 23: Listen, but not with your ears

God always answers, one way or another, even when people don't recognize his presence.

— *Job 33:14*

I have this really bad habit when it comes to hiking trips—instead of working my way up to the most difficult trails, I want to conquer them first! Our trip to Moab, Utah was no different. On our first day of hiking, I chose the longest and most technically difficult trail in the park.

Equipped with water and the Alltrails app, we set out.

Things were going swimmingly for the first 6 miles of the 10-mile hike. It was at mile 5 after we had ascended about 500 feet that I went to jump over a small gulch that tragedy struck. The jump didn't look that bad, except that it required me to land and immediately spring off that leg to the rockface above it. It shouldn't have been a problem for me, but my calf said otherwise.

I felt the pop immediately. I don't know if this was in my mind or actually happened, but I swore I heard the pop simultaneously.

By the grace of God, I landed on the rock face. And then went down immediately. It dropped me like a hot potato.

My husband was in shock.

I'm not typically a complainer. My parents' mantras as I grew up were "suck it up, buttercup," and "but, are you dead." So, for me to be on the ground definitely left him somewhat speechless.

I've had way too many tragic things happen in my life, so, sadly, I have experience with responding to dire situations, and my experience (and massive Type A personality) does not lend itself to sitting and waiting or defeat.

Fortunately, I had Ibuprofen in my backpack. I popped a handful of Ibuprofen, cussed a lot, and told Russ we had to keep moving. Mind you, I couldn't put weight on my right leg. We still had around 1000 ft to ascend, and then 1400 ft to descent. A walk in the park, right?

Not exactly.

I knew I was in trouble immediately.

I was pretty confident my calf muscle was either completely torn or at least partially torn, and I still had 4 miles to go before getting off this trail. I also knew I couldn't afford a helivac to get me out of there.

I prayed a lot.

And, we didn't quit moving.

I knew if we stopped moving what would happen to that muscle?

Four miles and 2 ½ hours later, we finally got off that trail and back in the car.

By the grace of God.

Literally.

There is no physiological reason I should have been able to finish that hike.

My calf was a disaster, and it continued to be a disaster for 8 weeks until it healed.

One of the biggest disservices we can do for our faith is to believe that God only speaks to us in words. God didn't speak to me in words that day, and I didn't need words to know that he was with me and his Spirit was speaking to me and guiding me out of that disaster.

I have a bittersweet relationship with the story of Job. I'm a little bitter because Job was a good, Godly man whose life God allowed Satan to wreak havoc on. I see the sweetness of this man and his life, though, as he stays faithful and God blesses the second half of Job's life doubly.

There are so many things we can learn from Job.

One of those things is how God speaks in a myriad of ways. We see this in Job 33:14-29 (MSG—emphasis mine) when Elihu is speaking to Job:

*God always answers, **one way or another**,
even when people don't recognize his presence.*

15-18 ***In a dream***, for instance, a vision at night,
when men and women are deep in sleep,
fast asleep in their beds—

***God opens their ears
and impresses them with warnings***

To turn them back from something bad they're planning,
from some reckless choice,
And keep them from an early grave,
from the river of no return.

19-22 ***Or, God might get their attention through pain,***
by throwing them on a bed of suffering,
So they can't stand the sight of food,
have no appetite for their favorite treats.
They lose weight, wasting away to nothing, r
educed to a bag of bones.
They hang on the cliff-edge of death,
knowing the next breath may be their last.

23-25 ***But even then an angel could come,
a champion—there are thousands of them!—
to take up your cause,***

A messenger who would mercifully intervene,
canceling the death sentence with the words: '
I've come up with the ransom!'
Before you know it, you're healed,
the very picture of health!

26-28 "Or, you may fall on your knees and pray—to God's delight!

You'll see God's smile and celebrate,

finding yourself set right with God.

You'll sing God's praises to everyone you meet,

testifying, 'I messed up my life—

and let me tell you, it wasn't worth it.

But God stepped in and saved me from certain death.

I'm alive again! Once more I see the light!

29 This is the way God works.

This isn't even a comprehensive list. These are just a few ways God steps into our lives and speaks to us in so many different ways. Our job is to be aware. It's to open our eyes and ears to God's hand and his leading. It's to remember that God doesn't simply speak to us in audible words— he speaks to us through our situations, our dreams, and our deliverance.

Just like Elihu encouraged Job to do, when we hear God's voice in our circumstances and our deliverance, we need to sing God's praises and recognize there's no such thing as coincidences in our lives.

This is what growth looks like.

As you focus on refreshing your faith today, I hope that you start to think about the times God has delivered you, that he or his angels have stepped in on your behalf to deliver you.

Reflection Questions

1. As you look back on your life, when are the times when God has stepped in to help or deliver you?
2. How do you typically respond when these things happen?
3. What do you want your response to be to these situations in the future?

Prayer

— God, I know your presence and your hand are constantly working in my life. Forgive me for the times when I haven't acknowledged the work you've done in my life. God, I know that your voice is more than just an audible whisper. I know you speak in my life, over my life, and in my different situations and encounters. Help me to do a better job of recognizing you in the everyday and the extraordinary.



Day 24: Pay Attention

God has transmitted his very substance into every Scripture, for it is God-breathed. It will empower you by its instruction and correction, giving you the strength to take the right direction and lead you deeper into the path of godliness.

— II Timothy 3:16 (TPT)

Have you ever had one of those moments where a song came on the radio and you knew it was God speaking to you?

Or, maybe God placed someone in your life at just the right moment to offer you hope and encouragement at the perfect time?

And, what about those times when you open up your Bible app, and the devotion for the day feels like it was written specifically for you?

Maybe even there have been mornings when you woke up from a dream and knew God was speaking to you in that dream space.

We know God speaks in a whisper.

It's those times when God speaks through different things, people, and experiences that we sometimes struggle to accept it as God speaking to us.

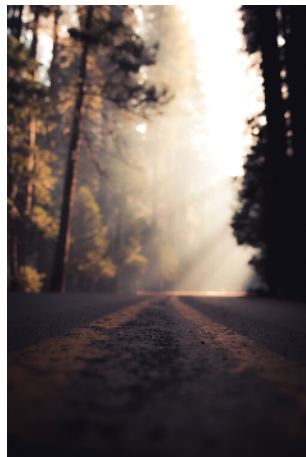
This week, we have spent our time really focusing on hearing God's voice in our lives. Today, I want you to think about the different ways God speaks to you—apart from the audible whisper.

One way God speaks to us is through scripture. II Timothy 3:16 (TPT) reminds us that:

God has transmitted his very substance into every Scripture, for it is God-breathed. It will empower you by its instruction and correction, giving you the strength to take the right direction and lead you deeper into the path of godliness.

I have found that the times I hear God the most clearly are the times I'm actively seeking him through scripture, and I don't think that's a coincidence. I need to that daily reminder of who God is, what he has done, and what he will continue to do. While it might not be God's audible voice through scripture, God still speaks to me and gives me strength through the words of these authors.

Another way God speaks is through other people. God gifts each of us differently, and we are called to use our gifts to serve. It's through those gifts and service that God speaks to us as well. Romans 12:6-8 (TPT) tells us:



God's marvelous grace imparts to each one of us varying gifts. So if God has given you the grace-gift of prophecy, activate your gift by using the proportion of faith you have to prophesy. If your grace-gift is serving, then thrive in serving others well. If you have the grace-gift of teaching, then be actively teaching and training others. If you have the grace-gift of encouragement, then use it often to encourage others. If you have the grace-gift of giving to meet the needs of others, then may you prosper in your generosity without any fanfare. If you have the gift of leadership, be passionate about your leadership. And if you have the gift of showing compassion, then flourish in your cheerful display of compassion.

God speaks through the prophesy, teaching, and preaching of others, but he also speaks through the encouragement and compassion of others that comes at just the time we need it.

We can't forget that God also speaks through the Holy Spirit in our lives. John 14:26-27 (TPT) says:

But when the Father sends the Spirit of Holiness, the One like me who sets you free, he will teach you all things in my name. And he will inspire you to remember every word that I've told you. "I leave the gift of peace with you—my peace. Not the kind of fragile peace given by the world, but my perfect peace. Don't yield to fear or be troubled in your hearts—instead, be courageous!"

Sometimes, I think people are intimidated by the idea of the holy spirit because they just don't really know what to do with it. I think, though, we need to be grateful that God has sent us this helper to guide and direct us. I like to think of the holy spirit as that voice in my head or feeling in my gut guiding me and inspiring me to do what it is God is calling me to do.

One of the most amazing God speaks is through his creation. Psalm 19:1-2 reminds us of this:

God's splendor is a tale that is told, written in the stars. Space itself speaks his story through the marvels of the heavens. His truth is on tour in the starry vault of the sky, showing his skill in creation's craftsmanship. Each day gushes out its message to the next, night by night whispering its knowledge to all.

I talked about finding the thin place in your life earlier, and, again, I think this a reminder that God truly does speak to us through those thin places in his creation. When we have those quiet moments where we are in awe of God's miracle of creation, that isn't a coincidence. That is God calming our spirits and giving us peace, speaking to our souls.

Today, I pray that you pay attention to the ways God is speaking to you that aren't necessarily audible—maybe through nature, a song, a podcast, another person, or even something you are reading. God is everywhere around us; it's our job to open ourselves up to his presence and his voice.



Reflection Questions

1. When has there been a time when God has spoken to you in a way that wasn't his audible whisper?
2. How open are you to the different ways God can speak to you?
3. Do you accept God's voice in different ways, or do you tend to look at those things as coincidences or luck?
4. How might it change your life and perspective if you started to look at those as God moments instead?

Prayer

— God, I know you are miraculous. Help me to pay attention throughout my day to the different ways your presence is around me and the different ways you are speaking to me. Help me pay attention to the gentle nudge of the holy spirit, to trust that it is the spirit helping me to hear that voice in my head or feel that nudge in my gut. Help me to understand there are no such things as coincidences and that your hand is constantly moving around me and in my life.

Day 25: Name it!

God always answers, one way or another, even when people don't recognize his presence.

— *Job 33:14*

I don't remember hearing much about hearing God's voice when I was younger. I don't want to say it's because no one ever talked about it in my church or family because I don't honestly remember. What I do know is that if it was talked about, it wasn't something that was given enough attention that it made an impression on me.

What about you?

When did you start really thinking about hearing God's voice?

For me, I honestly don't think I felt confident or comfortable talking about hearing the voice of God and naming it as the voice of God until I was well into my 30s and maybe even not until after I hit 40.

It's taken me a bit to understand my hesitation in this, but I think the majority of my struggle with this goes back to my upbringing in the legalistic church. There were a couple of ginormous obstacles there for me to be able to name God's voice in my life.

First, it was beaten into me that no one could add to or take away from scripture. That idea is incorrectly applied to our inability to hear God's voice today. Just like the church didn't believe prophecy and tongues were still in today's church, I have to think they kind of saw hearing from God as an individual in a similar manner. Consequently, it took me many years to undo that line of thinking and to understand that God still speaks today.

Second, there was never any talk of grace, mercy, or identity in Christ in my upbringing. Ignoring those aspects of God and a relationship with God really opens up a person to feelings of unworthiness, shame, and guilt. The doctrine becomes more about good behavior and doing enough—and then doing more. It isn't about intimacy with God or the grace of God. It isn't about the comfort and compassion that comes from a loving father. Instead, it becomes a rigid set of rules, regulations, and discipline.

That doesn't really lend itself to hearing from God.

It lends itself to feelings of guilt and shame.

I had to be out of that environment for decades before I was able to really heal from that mindset and that damning doctrine.

It was only then that I had the confidence that God would truly speak to me.

And, that's the key here—confidence that God wants to speak to you.

He does.

He loves you.

There is freedom and power in having the faith to be able to name God's voice in your life.

We all have different obstacles in our lives. It took me time to identify mine. Today, I hope you really take some time to think about your own obstacles—what is keeping you from confidently naming what God is saying to you today?

Is it fear of someone else's opinion of you?

Is it a faltering faith that makes you question if it is truly the voice of God you are hearing?

Is it shame?

Guilt?

Doubt?

Whatever it is in your life that is keeping you from naming the voice of God and the message God is speaking to you, I pray God removes that today.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the obstacles that are keeping you from naming God's voice and sharing what he is saying to you?
2. What is one way you can work with God to remove those obstacles today?
3. The next time God speaks to you, what are you going to do with that message?

Prayer

— God, I know you want to speak to me and to my heart in so many different ways. I know sometimes I have obstacles that get in the way of me naming your voice for what it is. I pray that you would help me to identify those obstacles and remove them. I pray you would give me the faith and the confidence to be able to truly name your voice in my life and share how you are speaking to me!



Week 5: Don't Worry About a Thing

1. Day 26: Don't Lose Days
2. Day 27: Trust God
3. Day 28: Rest like David
4. Day 29: The Battle is Real
5. Day 30: Focus on what God will do Instead of Worst-Case Scenarios
6. Day 31: Practice Gratitude
7. Day 32: Gratitude Journal



Day 26: Don't Lose Days

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

— Philippians 5:6-7

In 2022, 31% of Americans were diagnosed with varying degrees of anxiety. That statistic includes those who were diagnosed. I can only imagine how many Americans weren't diagnosed but still struggle with anxiety. Treatment for anxiety varies—some people can be treated with counseling and therapy, while others need medication to help balance their chemistry.

Thank God we have access to these counselors and medications today.

While not everyone might struggle with an anxiety disorder, we all have times in our lives when worry creeps in and we find ourselves affected.

- I've sat in rooms with moms while they cry out of worry and fear for their children.
- I've listened as adults lament the loss of a job and struggle to put one foot in front of the other because financial insecurity paralyzes them with worry.
- I've been in hospital rooms where the prognosis is so terrifying, the entire family is paralyzed by worry.
- I've listened as divorcees try to navigate life as a single parent and are inundated with worry about this new life.

We're a short ten days from Good Friday, and I have to wonder what Jesus was feeling during this time. We know he prayed in the Garden for God to take this cup away from him if there was any other way. What was he feeling as this day approached?

- Was he worried about his mom?
- Was he thinking about and worrying about the brutal nature of his death?
- Was he worried about what would happen to Judas after the betrayal?
- Did he just want to wrap Peter and John up in hugs to try to ease the burden and their own worry?

Sometimes I forget that while Jesus was divine, he was also human.

And, I'm sure he was worried.

When I stop and think about the plight of Jesus, it makes my troubles and worries feel so small. But, then I think about the love and concern of my Father, and I know my worries, your worries, are just as important to him as Jesus's were during these last two weeks on earth.

As I was thinking about this devotional and its purpose of helping you refresh your faith, grow closer to your Creator and prepare your heart for the remembrance of the death and resurrection of Christ, I knew I needed to include a week on worry.

Our society creates so many opportunities for worry.

While I know we can't escape these situations completely, I know that worry can be an elephant of an obstacle in our relationships with God. Worry alone has the power to distract us from God, to influence us to take our eyes off God and our purpose, and to trap us in our own minds.

We've already spent so much time reflecting on our lives, our prayer lives, and hearing God's voice.

This week, I want us to focus on how we handle these feelings of worry when they threaten to upturn our lives and fill our heads with the chaos we struggle to quiet.

The authors of the Bible were not quiet when it came to the dangers of worry and how we can combat those thoughts.

Paul reminds us in Philippians 5:6-7 (MSG):

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

We've already talked about the importance of being saturated in prayer and taking our chaotic thoughts captive. This is true when it comes to worrying as well. As Paul says here when we feel ourselves beginning to fret or worry, we need to stop and pray. At first glance, that might seem like a very Sunday School answer, but Paul doesn't just stop at that statement. He goes on to explain that we need to turn our worries into petitions and praises that we shape into prayers in order to let God know our concerns.

Paul never says we aren't going to have worries.

He never says our worries are invalid or unimportant.

Instead, he explains we need to take our worries and turn them into requests to present before God. Not only that, but Paul reminds us that God will work everything out for the good, and we will settle down. Soon, our worries will be replaced by Christ, and our entire lives will change.

Sometimes, I forget this.

I like to think I can solve all my problems on my own, but that isn't what God wants us to try to do. He wants us to come to him with our worries and lay them at his feet. Then, he can give us the peace we need.

Matthew 6:34 (MSG) compliments Paul's advice. Matthew records Jesus's words to:

"Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes."

Jesus reminds us here to stop getting worked up about what might happen tomorrow—basically to quit worrying. Jesus promises here that God will help us deal with whatever hard things come up. He will never leave us or forsake us.

We still struggle with that though, and we lose so much time worrying. But again, in Luke (12:25 MSG), Jesus addresses this habit:

"Has anyone by fussing before the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? If fussing can't even do that, why fuss at all? Walk into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They don't fuss with their appearance—but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the wildflowers, most of them never even seen, don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?"

We will never add an hour to our life by worrying, but we can certainly find ourselves taking hours off our lives by being encompassed in worry. Jesus reminds us here that God takes care of the wildflowers, so he will certainly take care of us. He attends to our needs, takes pride in us, and does his best for us.

Worry is definitely paralyzing, it steals our joy, and it keeps us from experiencing the peace that God wants us to experience. Thankfully, we have so many reminders from scripture of the promises God has made us to take care of us, to work out even the hardest things, and to do his best for us.

I hope today you make the first step toward taking worry captive in your life so that you don't lose another hour worrying about tomorrow.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the three biggest things you worry about in your life?
2. If you haven't given them to God, do that now. Lay those worries down at the feet of Jesus and remind yourself and God that he will work these things out for the good and walk with you through these hard times.
3. When you feel yourself starting to worry, what is one short prayer you can repeat to help you to stop worrying and accept the peace God has for you?

Prayer

— God, there are so many things in life that cause me to pause, to fret, and to worry. I know that you always keep your promises, and I know you have promised to walk with me through even the hardest of times and to work things out for good. When I start to slip into a mindset of worry, gently nudge me, God. Help me to turn my worries into petitions and praises, so that my worry can be replaced with the peace of Christ.



Day 27: Trust God

Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track.

— *Proverbs 3:5-6 (TPT)*

I am a planner.

I'm constantly thinking ahead, thinking through my day, my week, my month, considering what my schedule looks like, thinking through a meal plan for my family, making lists, and conscientiously thinking through all the details of everything I have planned.

I used to want to be a spontaneous person, one of those fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of people. I always felt like those people were more fun or more adventurous—like there was some sort of allure to that kind of lifestyle.

It took me years to accept that I am not one of those people, to see the merit in my own personality, and to understand that lifestyle would probably send me to an early grave due to all the stress it would cause me.

My brain is not hard-wired that way.

For planners, like me, trusting God and his plan when I can't see all the steps can be one of my biggest hurdles.

What I've learned about God is that his timeline and his plan aren't always as linear as I would like them to be. I can't always see beyond my current stop on this journey God is leading me on, and that is really challenging for me sometimes.

Even though I know in my heart that God always has a plan, that his will is perfect, and that he has promised me he will bring his work in me to completion, I struggle with the logistics of that at times.

I have to be reminded that God is good and that his plan is perfect.

This week, as you are refreshing your faith and growing closer to God by working toward eliminating worry from your life, I hope you can build your trust in God as well.

A couple of the most encouraging verses to me when it comes to trusting God comes from Proverbs 3:5-6 (MSG):

Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track.

I need these reminders daily:

- Trust God.
- Don't try to figure it out on my own.
- Listen for God's voice in everything I do and everywhere I go.
- Trust God to keep me on track.

It's refreshing to be reminded that God is so much bigger to me and he already has this figured out. My job is to listen for him everywhere and trust him to lead my steps.

There are times when life is going smoothly and this is easy to do, but I also know the valleys and what it's like to walk through those and attempt to trust God through the journey out of the valley and even out of the wilderness.

Maybe you find yourself in one of those places today.

Maybe that's why you are working through this study—to get through the valley or out of the wilderness.

I don't think there's a more important place to trust God than in the valleys and the wilderness.

Let me assure you that you are not alone.

Psalm 23 is probably one of the most widely quoted psalms. Some of the verses I first memorized at church camp as a kid were out of Psalm 23. Do you know why I appreciate Psalm 23? David doesn't pretend like life is going to always be easy. In verse 4(MSG), David says:

*Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.*

I love that David doesn't say "if you go through Death Valley." No, he says when the way goes through Death Valley because he knew life would never be easy.

The peace here comes from David's knowledge that God will walk beside him, will guide him, will give him security because of God's protection.

We have that same peace because we love that same God.

Even when life is hard and we don't know what the next step on our journey is, we don't have to fear because of our trust in God's guidance and security.

This same idea is repeated throughout the Psalms. We see it again in Psalm 55:22 (MSG):

*Pile your troubles on God's shoulders—
he'll carry your load, he'll help you out.
He'll never let good people
topple into ruin.*

David reminds us that we don't have to carry our own troubles—we should pile them onto God's shoulders and trust him to carry our load for us and to help us out of whatever trouble we find ourselves in.

Today, whether you are on the mountaintop, in the valley, or traveling through the wilderness, I hope that you take some time to think about how much you are trusting God with your journey. I pray that you are listening for his voice everywhere and in everything and that you are following in the direction he is leading you.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you tend to trust God with your journey or do you tend to try to create your own path and your own journey?
2. When is it easiest for you to trust God—on the mountaintops or when you find yourself in the Valleys?
3. How can you work toward trusting God at all times and not just when it is easiest for you?

Prayer

— God, I know that your voice is everywhere and in everything and that I desperately need to listen for it and follow the directions you are giving me for my life. Help me to give up my desire to control my own journey and truly listen to where it is leading me. Help me to trust your promises that you will walk with me through the dark times, that you will protect me, and that you will never lead a good person to ruin.

Day 28: Rest like David

Now, may the Lord himself, the Lord of peace, pour into you his peace in every circumstance and in every possible way. The Lord's tangible presence be with you all.

— II Thessalonians 3:16 (TPT)

When I first studied the psalms in-depth, I was in the middle of a very messy and ugly divorce. The more I read, the more I felt like a voyeur—intruding on David's most intimate conversations. I was amazed by his honesty, transparency, and emotion. Not only that, I was shocked at his constant prayers for the destruction, sometimes graphically described, of his enemies who seemed to be constantly beating down his doorstep.

I felt that.

It's possible I prayed David's prayers and replaced his enemies with my ex-husband's names at some of my lowest points, but you can't prove that!



As someone struggling with a battle that was so much bigger than me, I felt like David facing Goliath.

As I continued reading the psalms, I noticed a theme in David's writing. After he ranted about his enemies, remembered who God was, prayed for what God would do, and thanked God for the miracles that were coming, David consistently laid down to rest.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I'm facing an anxiety-inducing, extremely stressful situation the last thing I typically do is lay down and rest. My mind is usually racing non-stop, my heart rate is up, and there is no shutting down for rest or sleep.

David taught me a valuable lesson about rest, though.

David writes in Psalm 3:1-6 (TPT):

1 Lord, I have so many enemies, so many who are against me.

2 Listen to how they whisper their slander against me, saying:

"Look! He's hopeless! Even God can't save him from this!"

Pause in his presence

3 But in the depths of my heart I truly know

that you, Yahweh, have become my Shield;

You take me and surround me with yourself.

Your glory covers me continually.

You lift high my head.

4 I have cried out to you, Yahweh, from your holy presence.

You send me a Father's help.

Pause in his presence

5 So now I'll lie down and sleep like a baby—

then I'll awake in safety, for you surround me with your glory.

6 Even though ten thousand dark powers prowl around me,

I won't be afraid.

Here, David is fleeing from his son Absalom who was plotting to kill him. David has been the subject of slander and a murder plot, and he is literally hiding in order to save his life.

During this time, while David acknowledges the danger he's in and the hurt that has been inflicted upon him, he ultimately turns to what he knows as truth in his heart—which is that God is David's shield, his protection. David knows that his cries will be heard and answered by God.

Despite the life-and-death situation, he finds himself in, David lays down and sleeps like a baby—having faith that when he wakes up, God will surround David with glory.

Even when ten thousand dark powers prowl around him, he won't be afraid.

I want to have faith like that.

I doubt most of us have experienced this same level of physical and mental threats David was facing when he penned this psalm, but I know we all have experienced battles, relationships, and situations where we feel hopeless, alone, and afraid.

As our faith continues to grow and our relationship with God continues to develop intimately, we should make it our goal to have this level of faith and trust in God that will allow us to remember in our hearts God's promise of protection so strongly that we can lay down and sleep like a baby when our peace is threatened.

This isn't just a concept present in the old testament. This idea of peace and trust in God is repeated throughout the new testament as well. In II Thess 3:16 (TPT) says:

Now, may the Lord himself, the Lord of peace, pour into you his peace in every circumstance and in every possible way. The Lord's tangible presence be with you all.

God wants to pour his peace into us in every circumstance and in every possible way. This is a peace that is tangible—a peace you can physically feel. This is the peace that will allow you to rest like David—even in the midst of the strongest battles.

It's my hope today that you can find that same peace that David had and that you can rest in that peace even as the battle rages around you.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the situations in my life that keep me from rest?
2. What about those situations are a struggle for me.
3. Give those situations to God now, ask for his peace and comfort as you let him fight these battles for you.

Prayer

— *God, I want to be able to rest like David. I want to have faith in you and trust you so much that I give my thoughts, worries, concerns, fights, and relationships to you to handle for me. I know that worrying doesn't add even an hour to my life, but it is so hard to let go of these situations. God, I pray that you would remind me that you are my hope and defender. Help me to believe that in my heart and rest in that peace and knowledge.*



Day 29: The Battle is Real

“I am the Gateway. To enter through me is to experience life, freedom, and satisfaction. A thief has only one thing in mind—he wants to steal, slaughter, and destroy. But I have come to give you everything in abundance, more than you expect—life in its fullness until you overflow!”

— John 10:9-10

I'm an extroverted introvert—at least that's what I choose to call it.

People do not refuel my tank.

They typically drain my tank because I get so focused on meeting everyone else's needs that I tend to ignore my own until I'm completely worn down.

Sometimes, though, God calls me to things that involve people instead of just words, and, as much as my personality would prefer it, I have to heed that call.

I've hosted several small groups in my living room over the last few years, and God had definitely been nudging me, telling me it was time again.

After longer than I care to admit, I obeyed.

On the morning of our first meeting, I woke up to what seemed like a typical morning.

Until it wasn't.

Our internet was all sorts of screwed up—which meant my morning was all sorts of screwed up.

Two hours and three phone calls later, we had spotty internet at best.

I had missed my morning run, which always puts me in a bad mood, and I had to take my grandma to her follow-up with her oncologist. So, after the morning chaos with the internet company, my missed run, and the impending appointment, I was left with no time to do any work.

I jumped in the shower, got out the door in time to go pick my grandma up, and arrived at the hospital just in time.

I went through the typical ordeal of getting her into her appointment—stop at the door, run in and get a wheelchair, get her out of the car, wheel her inside where she waits while I park the car.

I've taken my grandma to more appointments than I can count and always found a parking spot close to the door. Not this day, I was literally 20 rows out! By the time I got parked and hiked back to the door, it was five minutes until her appointment.

We got to her appointment, and while it wasn't the best news, it wasn't the worst news either. Regardless, it was still a gut-punch kind of appointment.

Then, when we got back to her house, she handed me her shopping lists and books to be taken back to the library. God love her.

That meant the next day would be sacrificed as well because I needed to run all of her errands.

Dejected, stressed out, and exhausted, I got home a couple of hours before small group started.

It was just after I stepped foot in the door of my house that had not magically been cleaned and I eyed the dishes that did not do themselves while I was gone, that it finally hit me!

Satan!

You jerk!

Satan does not want good things to happen in our lives, and he definitely does not want God things to happen.

Sometimes, I forget that.

Looking back on this now, it all seems kind of silly, but when I was in the middle of one chaotic thing after another, it was definitely affecting me negatively.

That's what Satan does, and if we aren't cognizant of it, he can really wreak havoc on our lives.

Growing up, I don't remember hearing much about Satan, other than the fact that he was evil and he caused us to sin. What that meant to me was that when I wanted to cuss, it was Satan's fault. Now, I'm not saying that it isn't Satan's influence causing me to want to cuss, but I know now that there is an enormous battle raging around me at all times, and Satan is on the opposing team.

It's only been in the last several years that I've learned about who and what Satan truly is and what his goal is. That knowledge was important for me to understand as I grew in my faith and my intimacy with God.

Probably one of my favorite scriptures is John 10:9-10 because it is the scripture that has allowed me to truly understand both what God desires for my life, and the challenges I have to face to get that.

"I am the Gateway. To enter through me is to experience life, freedom, and satisfaction. A thief has only one thing in mind—he wants to steal, slaughter, and destroy. But I have come to give you everything in abundance, more than you expect—life in its fullness until you overflow!"

Jesus is truly the gate to life, freedom, and satisfaction, but Satan is the thief who only wants to keep us from that gate by stealing, slaughtering, and destroying. If you think about this with the metaphor of the sheep and shepherd, Jesus is the shepherd, we are the sheep, and Satan is literally the thief attempting to destroy us.

God's desire is to give us everything in abundance, more than we could ever expect, life in its fullness until we are overflowing. Satan's goal is to steal that, to destroy us, to keep us from getting that.

He doesn't play fair.

This is a battle.

Paul recognized the battle. He explains it in II Corinthians 10:3-4 (TPT):

For although we live in the natural realm, we don't wage a military campaign employing human weapons, using manipulation to achieve our aims. Instead, our spiritual weapons are energized with divine power to effectively dismantle the defenses behind which people hide.

This isn't a battle physically taking place in front of us. It's a battle being fought spiritually with divine power.

It's a battle we will never win by ourselves.

You probably first learned about the armor of God when you were a kid in Sunday School. I know I've heard it so many times I sometimes take it for granted or forget how important it is in this battle. Paul creates this metaphor of battle armor because it was something his audience would understand and also because, even though we might not be able to see this physical battle raging, he understood it was raging in the spiritual realm. He tells us in Ephesians 6:11 (TPT)

Put on God's complete set of armor provided for us, so that you will be protected as you fight against the evil strategies of the accuser!

Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44), he is a prowling lion (I Peter 5:8), and he is an evil strategist.

This is what we are up against.

Thankfully, we have an example in Christ of how to handle Satan's attacks. When Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, he finally said to Satan:

But Jesus said, "Go away, Satan! For the Scriptures say: Kneel before the Lord your God and worship only him." (Matthew 4:10 TPT)

Jesus audibly told Satan to get away from him, and you know what happened?

At once the accuser left him, and angels suddenly gathered around Jesus to minister to his needs (Matthew 10:11 TPT).

When Jesus told Satan to go, Satan left him at once. He didn't continue to harass Jesus, he didn't try one more trick. No, he left him immediately.

It seems awkward the first time you audibly tell Satan to leave you alone, but it gets less and less awkward the more you do it.

When we're in a battle, the most strategic thing we can do is learn about our enemy. We are fortunate enough to have vivid descriptions of our enemy throughout scripture as well as a strategy for defeating him. I hope today you take some time to think about the different ways Satan is attacking you and seeking to steal, kill, and destroy so that you can be aware when he attacks again.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the areas in your life Satan attacks the most?
2. When was there a specific time when, looking back, you know Satan was attacking you?
3. Have you audibly told Satan to leave you alone? Why or why not?
4. When you realize Satan is attacking you next, what is your strategy?

Prayer

— God, I know there is a battle raging around me constantly. Help me to be aware of Satan's strategies and attacks, and help me to have the strength to stand up to them and order Satan out of my presence. God, I know that you have promised to give me a way out of every temptation and you will send your angels to fight on my behalf. Help me to remember that when the battle is raging around me.



Day 30: Focus on what God will do instead of Worst-Case Scenarios

Lord, show me your kindness and mercy, for these men oppose and oppress me all day long.

Not a day goes by without somebody harassing me. So many in their pride trample me under their feet.

But in the day that I'm afraid, I lay all my fears before you and trust in you with all my heart.

— Psalm 56:1-3

My family has this really terrible habit of ending up in situations that should kill them.

What that means for me is that I've become excellent at navigating trauma, hospitals, and the American healthcare system.

What that also means is that I have a healthy dose of PTSD every time I walk into a hospital, but that's a story for another day.

My parents were in a terrible motorcycle accident that left my mom with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and in hospitals and rehab for 9 months, my dad had a blood clot in his lungs that had a 50% chance of killing him, he's had a heart attack, and the last thing he decided to do was lose all circulation in his leg. My 91-year-old grandma had cancer and made it through 7 weeks of chemo and radiation—miraculously.

Sometimes, I feel like it never ends.

What I've learned through these traumas, though, is that I'm not a worst-case scenario kind of human being.

The sky could literally be falling, and I would be the crazy person pointing out what a nice shade of blue that piece of the sky was that just landed next to me, and at least it didn't land on my head!

When I listen to doctors diagnose and suggest treatment, I never see the worst. I always hear and focus on the task at hand.

I know there are probably extensive explanations for why some people see the best in situations and others see the worst, why some people see the glass half full and others see the glass half empty. I know it's some weird combination of nature and nurture. To be completely honest with you, I'm not sure if it's possible for the worst-case-scenario people, the glass-half-full folks, to ever change their nature completely. I know I can't even wrap my head around changing my thinking from the eternal optimist to the eternal pessimist.

As much as I wish we all could be positive, best-case-scenario, thinkers, I know that isn't realistic. What I do know, though, is that God wants us to shift our focus from obsessing over worst-case scenarios to praising him for what he is going to do in and through us and all of our situations.

Human psychology tells me this is easier for some people than it is for others. Not only are some people glass-half-full thinkers, but some people are consummate worriers. We've talked about worry this week. We've talked about how worrying doesn't add a single hour to your life. Today, I want you to focus on replacing those worries and those worst-case scenarios with gratitude and faith for how God will work in these situations.

As you already know, I'm a big fan of David, his faith, his heart, and his prayers. Psalm 56 is another prayer where David is struggling with what feels like an impossible situation—he was taken captive by the Philistines in Gath after fleeing Saul—who also wanted to kill him. Honestly, I can't say I would blame David if he chose to focus on the worst-case scenario here, but he doesn't. In verses 1-3 (TPT) he says:

*1 Lord, show me your kindness and mercy,
for these men oppose and oppress me all day long.*

2 Not a day goes by without somebody harassing me.
So many in their pride trample me under their feet.

3 But in the day that I'm afraid, I lay all my fears before you
and trust in you with all my heart.

David had every reason to be afraid. He had every earthly reason to worry, to fear, and to feel like he had no way out of this.

Have you been in those situations?

I have.

When our backs are against the wall and we can't see any way out, it's so easy to give up. It's so easy to allow ourselves to become so engulfed by worry that we can't even function in our everyday lives.

David didn't do that, though.

Instead, he acknowledged the severity of the situation, but then he chose to focus on the deliverance God would give him. He chose to lay his fear and his worry at the feet of God and to trust him—a response we see over and over again from David.

This response is the response God continually reinforces throughout the old testament.

In Joshua 1:9 (MSG), we're reminded of this:

Strength! Courage! Don't be timid; don't get discouraged. God, your God, is with you every step you take."

Isaiah 41:10 (MSG) encourages us:

Don't panic. I'm with you. There's no need to fear for I'm your God. I'll give you strength. I'll help you. I'll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you.

When we are faced with dire situations, it is so, so easy to become consumed with worry and the worst possible outcomes, but God gives us every reason to place our trust in him, to lay our worry at his feet, and to trust that God will keep a steady, firm grip on us and walk with us until that chapter ends. When we don't feel like we have the strength to take one more steady, God will be our strength.

Instead of focusing on what could possibly go wrong or what the worst possible outcome could be, God wants us to lay those worries at his feet and trust him to walk with us and work in those situations.

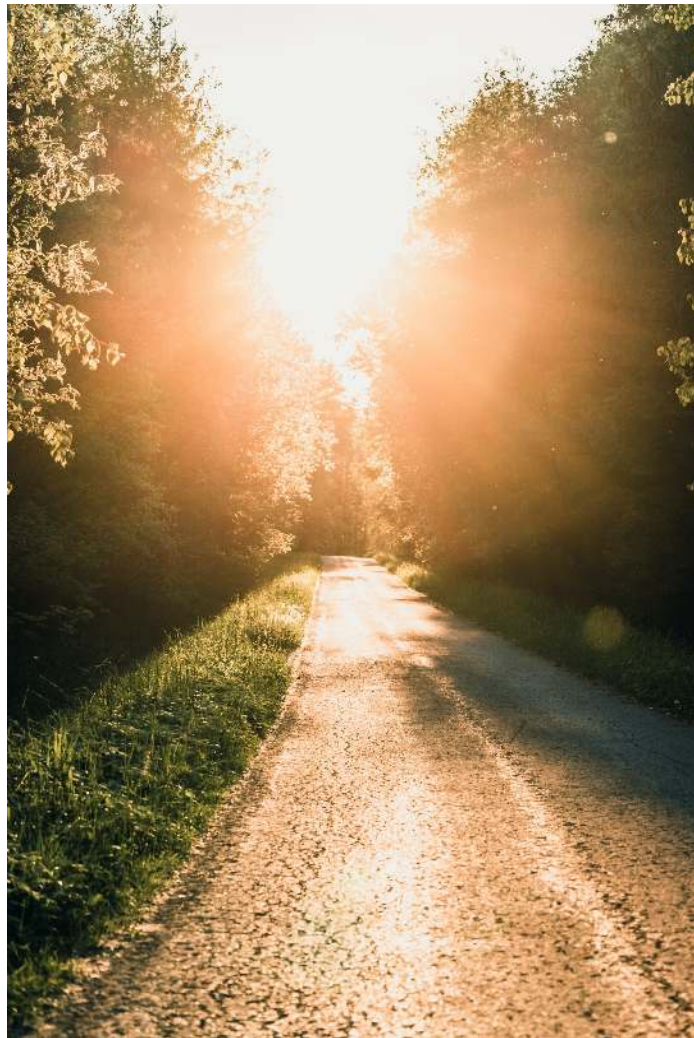
That's my prayer for you today—that you would trust God with your worries and your fear-inducing situations.

Reflection Questions

1. When you are faced with any kind of trauma, what is your gut reaction—worst-case-scenario or best-case-scenario?
2. Why do you think you react that way?
3. What is going on right now that has the potential to cause you to worry and think about worst-case scenarios?
4. Take a few minutes to meditate on those scriptures and to lay your worries at the feet of God, to focus on what he will do instead of the worst thing that could happen.

Prayer

— God, I know I need to trust you and look to you for what you're going to do in my life, in these challenging, situations, and with me. I know that you have promised to walk with me and guide me step by step on my journey. When I feel overwhelmed or like life is out of control, God, I pray that you would help me remember that you are always in control and I don't need to worry or focus on worst-case scenarios.



Day 31: Practice Gratitude

Let your heart be always guided by the peace of the Anointed One, who called you to peace as part of his one body. And always be thankful.

— *Colossians 3:15*

My grandma was a quiet, wise, compassionate woman. She had a house full of foster kids, her own kids, and my grumpy grandpa to take care of, yet she always found time to spread encouragement and show gratitude to others through cards and letters. She mailed these letters quietly, never drawing attention to herself, and I can only imagine how many lives she touched through her heartfelt words. Simply by taking a few minutes out of her day to write a letter, she undoubtedly blessed so many other people.

We teach our kids to say “thank you” almost as soon as they start talking. Sometimes, I think it becomes an automated response or even a forced response. I can’t say I’m not guilty of that same automated response to God. I thank God for the day or the food or my family, but how much heart is there behind those statements?

We’re almost at the end of this week’s study on worry, and maybe you’re wondering what gratitude has to do with worry. That’s a fair question.

Let me ask you this—have you ever tried to worry at the same time as you are practicing gratitude?

Paul had every reason to have a spirit of fear and a soul full of worry, yet his constant refrain was one of joy and gratitude. He recognized that our lives should be prayers of thanks to God, that God's plan for us is perfection—even when we can't see how that could possibly be true.

I'm sure you've had seasons where you were overwhelmed, stressed out, and feeling hopeless. Maybe you weren't fearful of your next beating, riot, or imprisonment like Paul, but that doesn't make your stresses any less valid or less real. As you continue to refresh your faith during this season, I pray that your heart is filled with gratitude instead of worry and anxiety.

Reflection Questions

1. Is your spirit more often one of worry or one of gratitude?
2. What are the things that remind you to be grateful daily?
3. What practices can you employ to help you replace your worry with gratitude?

Prayer

— God, help my attitude to be more like Paul's when it comes to gratitude. Help me to recognize when worry is overtaking my mind and soul and to be able to shift that worry into gratitude. Help me to truly make my life a prayer and to be constantly showing you the gratitude you deserve. Help me to remember that your ways are perfect, even though this world is imperfect.

Day 32: Gratitude Journal

Let joy be your continual feast. Make your life a prayer. And in the midst of everything be always giving thanks, for this is God's perfect plan for you in Christ Jesus.

— *1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

I was going through a really dark time when I felt completely and utterly hopeless. I was in the middle of an ugly, ugly divorce where I felt like I was being stepped on, walked over, and used as a doormat every other day.

My worries and anxiety greatly outweighed my gratitude.

I was leading a book club for a group of ladies at the time, and we were studying Joyce Meyer's "Battlefield of the Mind." Throughout that study, I had this overwhelming urge to replace my worries and anxiety with gratitude.

I bought a gratitude journal.

I started to focus my prayer time on what God had already done, who he was, and the promises I knew he would keep to me.

It changed my entire perspective.

Today, we're going to do something a little different.

Yesterday, I introduced you to this scripture:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (TPT):

Let joy be your continual feast. Make your life a prayer. And in the midst of everything be always giving thanks, for this is God's perfect plan for you in Christ Jesus.

God's perfect plan is for us to make our life a prayer where we are always giving thanks.

Starting today, let's begin that lifestyle.

There were three downloads with this study: the ebook (which you're reading!), the prayer journal (that you've hopefully been using), and the gratitude journal.

Today, I want you to grab that gratitude journal—whether you download it and fill it out or print it out and write in it.

During your prayer and reflection time today, I want you to work through those prayers of gratitude. Then, I hope you either make more copies of that journal or find yourself a journal to use specifically for that purpose and you continue to live a life of gratitude.

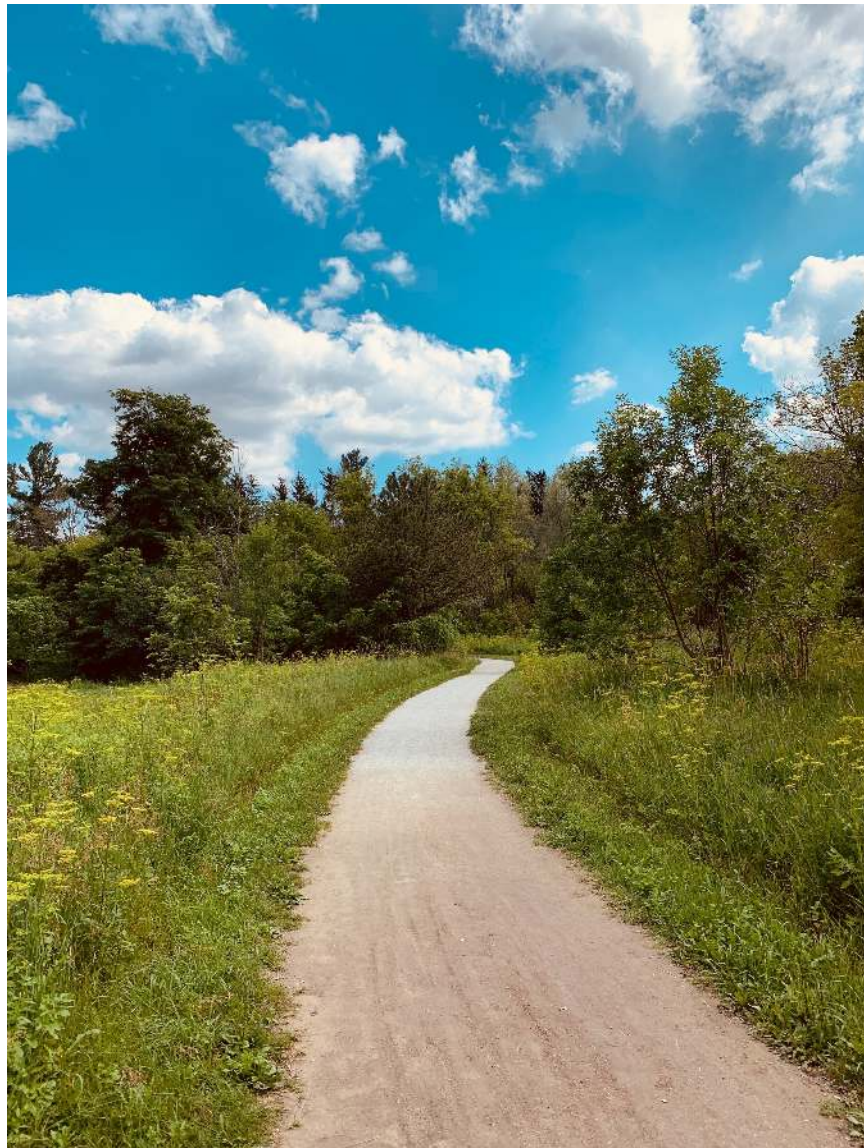
I can't wait to hear how it changes your world.

Reflection Questions

1. Spend some time in your gratitude journal.

Prayer

— God, help me to focus on gratitude today. Help me to open my eyes and heart to everything you're doing in my life and the lives of those around me.



Week 6: Life in the Spirit

1. Day 33: Love
2. Day 34: Joy
3. Day 35: Peace
4. Day 36: Patience
5. Day 37: Kindness
6. Day 38: Goodness
7. Day 39: Gentleness
8. Day 40: Strength of Spirit



Day 33: Love

For you, my brothers, were called to freedom; only do not let your freedom become an opportunity for the sinful nature (worldliness, selfishness), but through love serve and seek the best for one another. For the whole Law [concerning human relationships] is fulfilled in one precept, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself [that is, you shall have an unselfish concern for others and do things for their benefit].”

— Galatians 5:13-14 AMP

Last week was an interesting week for my daughter, Kate, and her youth group cronies.

For the past six months or so, they have been looking forward to their mission trip in Pittsburgh organized through a global mission organization.

For years, they attended camps and conferences where they slept in comfy beds, ate pretty decent foods, heard accomplished speakers, attended concerts, and were generally entertained.

They were good.

Don't get me wrong.

They have their place.

This year, though, they wanted to focus on serving the least of these, on loving the unlovable, on being a little uncomfortable, and on forcing their feet to meet the pavement when it came to serving and loving.

After just a couple of days there, they realized their experience wasn't panning out to be anything they had planned. Instead of serving the least of these, they were shuttled to grandiose churches surrounded by million-dollar houses and met by church staff who didn't know they were coming and ultimately had them clean their church.

Repeatedly, they were thrust into situations where adults and church folks essentially used them as slave labor to do the things nobody else wanted to do for organizations that were paying people to complete these tasks.

It was a disaster.

Finally, the leaders of her youth group took matters into their own hands. They took the teens to Wal-Mart, split them up into groups, and gave them a grocery list to shop for—telling them to buy the stuff they would eat, not the cheap crap!

Then, they packed sack lunches, coolers of cold water, and snacks and went to a homeless camp in downtown Pittsburgh where they spent the day sitting with the least of these, feeding them, loving on them, and making sure every single person had a seat at their table.

There are so many lessons to be learned here.

We could talk about not delegating the crappy church tasks to the teens or treating them as second-class citizens.

We could talk about the dangers of lack of communication or planning.

We could talk about advocating for what is right.

Or, we could talk about what it really looks like to love.

Agape Love

One of the major points Paul was making in this portion of his letter was that there is a difference between living in the flesh and living by the Spirit, and those two things are not compatible—you can't do them both at the same time!

Then, in Galatians 5:13-14 (AMP), Paul tells the church: For you, my brothers, were called to freedom; only do not let your freedom become an opportunity for the sinful nature (worldliness, selfishness), but through love serve and seek the best for one another. For the whole Law [concerning human relationships] is fulfilled in one precept, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself [that is, you shall have an unselfish concern for others and do things for their benefit!]"

It's important to recognize the love Paul is referring to here is agape love. You've probably heard agape love described in different ways over the years. I think the easiest way to try to wrap our heads around agape love is to recognize this isn't an emotion. I love the way the Amplified bible expands on this and explains that it is more of a guiding principle or an attitude, that, agape love is the unselfish concern for others as well as a willingness and desire to seek the best for others.

When we think about agape love in this context, essentially what Paul is telling his readers is that if they are living by the Spirit, then they will be guided by an innate unselfish concern for others. They will be willing and even desire to seek the best for those around them.

The Fruit of the Spirit is Love:

Back in the day when I was a practicing Pharisee (even though I didn't realize it), one of the things I used to hear Sunday-morning Theologians argue over was whether or not there were fruits of the spirit (plural) or one fruit of the spirit (singular) that encompassed all of these qualities.

Oh, and one of my other favorite arguments about this topic was whether or not you had to cultivate one of these qualities before you could move on to the next quality.

For example, you had to master love before you could ever have joy, and you had to master both love and joy before you could have peace...you get the idea.

This is real, folks.

These were actual sermons and arguments.

Honestly, I think Paul was probably banging his head against a wall in heaven and wishing he could pen some letters to the church over this chaos.

So, here's the thing—you can read different commentaries and translations of the bible that will tell you different things about how to interpret this section of scripture, just like you can with so many other scriptures and books of the bible. At the end of the day, though, I think we have to take a step back and look at Paul's big picture or we miss his entire point.

The point Paul was making was that a life lived in the Spirit will bear spiritual fruit; whereas, a life lived for self or the flesh will bear a selfish fruit.

Period.

As he has already mentioned multiple times in Galatians 5, the Spirit and the Flesh are not compatible. Therefore, the fruit of these two lives are going to look vastly different.

The fruit of someone who the Spirit guides is going to be love in action (agape love).

Different translations present Galatians 5:22 in different ways. Here are some of the most popular, and some of my favorites:

But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions... (TPT)

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others... (MSG)

But the fruit of the Spirit [the result of His presence within us] is love [unselfish concern for others]...(AMP) But the fruit of the Spirit is love... (NIV)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love... (ESV)

While different translators present this semantically differently, the meaning is the same—a life lived in the spirit is one distinctly marked by love.

The Dangers of Not Loving One Another:

I'm going to go back a few verses in Galatians 5 for a minute. As Paul is talking to the Galatians about loving their neighbors as themselves (agape love, remember) in verse 14, he follows it up with a "but" statement in verse 15:

But if you bite and devour one another [in bickering and strife], watch out that you [along with your entire fellowship] are not consumed by one another (AMP)

But if you continue to criticize and come against each other over minor issues, you're acting like wild beasts trying to destroy one another! (TPT)

If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then? (MSG)

Paul explains that a life lived by the spirit is guided by love for others in action, but he warns that the dangers of not loving one another is bickering, strife, the devouring of one another, ravaging, and annihilating one another.

I spent years in a church that was driven by everything Paul warns against.

We didn't love one another.

We didn't have an unselfish concern for others.

We didn't have affection for others.

No, instead of love, there was: Criticism Legalism Strife Destruction of others

For years, I was part of that. Even though it was never stated directly, the church might as well have rewritten this verse to say “Love your neighbor as yourself—as long as they think like you, look like you, and believe the exact same thing as you.”

Scary.

Love is....

I talk about this often, but I am so thankful we have a definition of what love is—both from these verses in Galatians and from Paul's description in his letter to the Corinthians. In I Corinthians 13, Paul is again referring to agape love when he says:

If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,

Doesn't have a swelled head,

Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first,"

Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn't revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,

Puts up with anything,

Trusts God always,

Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

Love never dies.

I Corinthians 3:3-8 (MSG)

What's Love Got to Do with It?

Everything

Love has everything to do with it.

This is a weird time.

There's so much hate in the world, in our churches, and in our communities.

For some of us, we might read about a life of love and be encouraged because we see this fruit in our own lives and in the lives of those leading the churches we are part of.

For some of us, though, we might read this and feel the Holy Spirit giving us a nudge or even a yell because the fruit we are bearing and the fruit that our churches are bearing look nothing like these definitions. In fact, they might even look a little too much like that "but" statement Paul uses to warn the Galatians about.

They might look more like

Bickering

Strife

Annihilation

Devouring

Friends, we are all in different situations, but I pray today that we all start to move toward lives governed by love—true agape love.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the biggest hurdle you have when it comes to love?
2. What type of community does your church resemble? One that loves or one that bickers, judges, and annihilates others?
3. What is one practical step you can take to start loving better?

Prayer

— God, help me to cultivate love, not only in these Lenten and Easter seasons, but in every season of my life. Help me to love others better instead of living a life of bickering and judgment.

Day 34: Joy

But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.

— *Galatians 5:22-23 (TPT)*

My 17-year-old daughter, Kate, was in Pittsburgh serving for a week with a global mission organization this summer.

Typically, her youth pastors don't let the teens take their phones on their trips in an attempt to limit outside distractions. For some reason, this year they allowed the teens to have them. I wasn't concerned about this for Kate because she's hardly ever on her phone unless it's to watch stupid reels on Instagram.

They arrived in Pittsburgh on Sunday evening and headed to their first site Monday morning.

I didn't hear from Kate until Monday night, which also didn't surprise me.

What did surprise me was the content of the text she sent Monday night. She said she had a good day, but she was a little disappointed because the camp they were serving at didn't even know they were coming, was already overstaffed, and didn't have anything for them to do.

While she was disappointed with the planning, her attitude was still good, and we figured it was just a communication/organization snafu.

No worries, right?

Tomorrow would be better.

I didn't hear from her on Tuesday, so I just assumed all the chaos had cleared and they had fallen into a better rhythm.

On Wednesday, the youth leader sent a message in the parent group chat saying it had been a bit of a disastrous week, that they had organized their own mission work for Thursday, and that they would be coming home a day early.

Oh, dear.

Late Wednesday night, Kate texted to make sure I knew what was going on, but she didn't really say much else.

I had no idea what we would be met with on Thursday evening when she came home.

As soon as she pulled into the driveway and got out of her car, she started laughing.

We headed to dinner, and she didn't stop talking or laughing for a solid two hours.

Despite the organizational nightmare they had endured and the fact that the only mission work they actually completed was of their own doing, unbridled joy was seeping out of her as if it couldn't be contained.

It was such an interesting response to such a frustrating week.

How was it possible that she was still so upbeat and joyful after dealing with trial after trial and frustration after frustration?

Why was I so surprised by her reaction?

We've all probably heard that Chuck Swindoll quote that "Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it." From a mental health and psychological standpoint, I'm not sure how entirely accurate that statement is, but I do know this: we don't always choose our emotions, but we can choose our reactions.

For some crazy reason, Kate chose joy, and I think we can learn a thing or two from that reaction. I know I can!

Joy that Overflows

I love the way The Passion Translation discusses the different ways love can be seen in action. It reads like this:

But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless. Galatians 5:22-23 (TPT)

Paul spent several paragraphs introducing this concept of what it looks like when we live guided by the Spirit instead of the self, and he concludes in these verses by giving some practical examples of what that Spirit-led existence and expression of agape love will look like in our lives.

If we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, our attitudes and lives should be filled with a joy that overflows—even in frustrating and chaotic situations.

I, for one, can honestly admit that I don't always model that.

My go-to response for frustrating and chaotic situations is not typically one of overflowing joy!

No, my go-to response to these situations is typically more of angrily dissecting all the problems and identifying the incompetence that clearly could have been avoided—how very Jesus-like of me, right?

To be completely honest, here, I think this is probably a gut-check for most of us because I haven't seen a lot of people modeling joy that overflows in chaos.

I'm just saying...

The Root of Joy

I did a little hermeneutical study of the word we translate as "joy" in the bible. What we translate to mean "joy" is translated from "chara" which means a lasting emotion that comes from our belief and trust that God will keep his promises.

If you were to go through the 400ish times joy is mentioned in the Bible, you'll find that the majority of the time you see a reference to joy, it is related to trusting God even in the darkest times, the attitude we should have because we are living saved, the emotion involved in praising God (rejoicing), and finally an emotion that God displays in various situations related to creation.

This might be a bit of a stretch, but if we take a step back and look at the actual definition of "chara" and the references to joy in the bible, I kind of think of it as being able to look at the crappy and chaotic times in our lives and recognizing that they are temporary, that they too shall pass, and that there is a bigger picture we have to take a step back and look at.

Again, I will be the first to admit I don't always do that and it isn't always easy, but I think we can all find encouragement from several different scriptures to help us remember this.

Psalm 16:11 (TPT) Because of you, I know the path of life, as I taste the fullness of joy in your presence. At your right side I experience divine pleasures forevermore!

Romans 14:17-18 (TPT)--After Paul is talking about causing strife in relationships over foolish things like food... For the kingdom of God is not a matter of rules about food and drink, but is in the realm of the Holy Spirit, filled with righteousness, peace, and joy. Serving the Anointed One by walking in these kingdom realities pleases God and earns the respect of others.

I Peter 1:8 (TPT) You love him passionately although you have not seen him, but through believing in him you are saturated with an ecstatic joy, indescribably sublime and immersed in glory.

Proverbs 17:22 (TPT) A joyful, cheerful heart brings healing to both body and soul. But the one whose heart is crushed struggles with sickness and depression.

Let's be honest for a minute--sometimes life just sucks. It feels overwhelming, daunting, chaotic, and like it will never get better.

If you've never experienced one of those times in your life, maybe you'll be the minority and get to live a completely charmed existence, but for the majority of us, we've lived through those times.

And, they're really hard.

It's so hard to have a heart of joy and an attitude of joy in those times.

Shoot, it's hard to have a heart and attitude of joy in the pick-up line at school some days, right?!?!

Maybe this can be a reminder for us that the root of joy is firmly planted in the fact that we trust God To deliver us. To Save us. To Prosper us. To give us immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine. To remind us in these moments that this too shall pass.

No Formula for Joy..

I have a confession.

I know it's super popular these days, and I know a bunch of experts suggest this strategy, but I hate it when I see articles that promise "3 simple steps to...fill in the blank here." I struggle with that so much because we are all so different, and our needs, situations, families, relationships, etc... are so different.

So, I wish I could sit here today and tell you I have 3 surefire steps for you to live with a heart and an attitude of joy, but that would be a lie.

I can give you the foundation as to why you should humbly go to God and ask for Him to help you cultivate a life, heart, and attitude of joy, but your steps for cultivation are probably going to look very different than mine, your partner's, your friend's, and your pastor's.

That's my prayer for you today, friend—that you recognize what joy looks like, why you need to cultivate it, and that you will actively seek guidance from God to lead you to your own cultivation of joy.

Reflection Questions

1. When you are faced with chaos, how do you typically respond?
2. Do you consider yourself a joyful person? Why or why not?
3. What is one practical step you can take to help you cultivate more joy in your life?

Prayer

— God, I pray that you would help me to recognize joy, to remember where it comes from, and that you would help me to choose joy and to continue to cultivate it in my life.

Day 35: Peace that Subsides

At last we have freedom, for Christ has set us free! We must always cherish this truth and firmly refuse to go back into the bondage of our past.

— *Galatians 5:1 (TPT)*

One of my favorite bible study apps launched a daily study of Deuteronomy last year. Admittedly, I had never read Deuteronomy in its entirety, so I saw this as a perfect opportunity to dig a little deeper into a book I had only read bits and pieces of.

At first, my deep dive into Deuteronomy was, believe it or not, pretty interesting. As a fan of what God can do in the wilderness, I was intrigued by the Israelites' struggles, Moses's frustration, and God's responses to the wandering I've heard about and read pieces of throughout my life.

Then, though, I arrived at the last several chapters of my journey through Deuteronomy, and I've got to tell you, I was perplexed, frustrated, confused, and a little heartbroken for the Israelites.

If you've never read Deuteronomy, let me just give you a content warning that the end of the book is a list of rules and regulations handed to the Israelites before they can enter the Promised Land after being enslaved, escaping slavery, failing repeatedly, and consequently wandering around in the wilderness for forty years instead of reaching their destination that should have only taken them 11 days.

Here's the thing—I know context is everything. I understand that God has reasons for giving the Israelites all of these laws and commands, but that doesn't mean that I have to like them!

Then, when I try to wrap my head around what it must have been like to attempt to abide by all of these laws and keep all of these commands, I struggle to see how it could have even been possible.

When I try to think about putting myself in their shoes, it causes me immediate anxiety.

Did they ever have any peace? Or, were they constantly trying to keep all the rules, laws, and commands straight?

But, then, when I think about it that way, it reminds me that isn't so different than the church I grew up in.

The rules might have looked differently, but they were still there. The checklists might have had different boxes, but they were still there. The commands might have come from other humans, but they were still there.

It's then that I'm reminded of the message Paul was trying to convey to the Galatians and how that message is still applicable to us today: At last we have freedom, for Christ has set us free! We must always cherish this truth and firmly refuse to go back into the bondage of our past. Galatians 5:1 (TPT)

We have freedom from laws, commands, rules and checklists because Christ has set us free.

With that freedom and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we should be able to experience this peace Paul talks about in Galatians 5:22 when he talks about a peace that subdues (TPT).

Freedom that Brings Peace:

I'm a big-picture person.

I do best when I can see the big picture first, and then I can break it down and focus on the individual and specific parts.

For example, when I write, I think about a series first, and then I think about the individual articles in that series. I need to be able to see the whole before I see the parts.

Not everyone thinks this way.

I would encourage you to stop right now and think about your own thought processes but also your different relationships and communities. Maybe you have a boss who nit-picks the minute details without ever focusing on the end goal. Maybe you have a partner who lives in the now and never thinks about tomorrow. Maybe you have an instructor who can't make connections from one lesson to the next. Maybe you have a church that focuses on traditions, checklists, and rules instead of who God calls you to be.

When we focus on the details without seeing the big picture, we run the dangerous risk of missing the point altogether.

I can't help but think that was the problem in the church in Galatia, and I'm sadly confident it's the case in way too many churches and homes today.

Paul was attempting to remind the Galatians that Christ came to bring them freedom from the law, that God gave them the Holy Spirit to guide them, and that the fruit of a life lived in the Spirit is love in action, in all its forms:

joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit.

Galatians 5:23 (TPT)

Just as we have joy because of that freedom, a Spirit-filled existence is also one where we are at peace spiritually.

This peace is a spiritual peace.

It's the calm and assurance that comes with grace.

It's the rest and stillness that comes with Christ.

It's the freedom from laws, rules, and checklists that allows you to breathe again—or maybe for the first time.

Peace that Eliminates Fear

I was a full-blown adult before I truly quit fearing I was going to screw up, fail to ask forgiveness for a specific sin, and manage to land myself in hell.

There are still times when I find myself falling back into the rules, regulations, and checklists that dominated so many years of my life.

I wrote a piece about financial freedom earlier this year. I published it on a Wednesday, and my husband lost his job that Friday.

This is real. I can't make this stuff up.

We were absolutely fine financially, but I still found myself paralyzed with fear.

It's in those times of fear that I find my old religious self rearing its ugly head.

I began to question what we were doing that was making God keep my husband from getting hired: Were we not tithing enough? Were we not serving enough? Was my quiet time not long enough? Did I need to read my bible more?

If I'm not careful, I can easily find myself traveling all the way through these unproductive and destructive rabbit holes that are the furthest thing from the peace and freedom I should have in Christ.

God does not reward us based on how well we perform.

My husband's job situation was not a result of how well either one of us was performing as Christians.

It's easy for us to sit here today and judge the Galatians for their inability to walk away from the laws, rules, and regulations they were familiar with or the faulty theology they were influenced by, but if I'm being honest, I can easily find myself falling into those same pitfalls.

The peace that Paul speaks about here in Galatians 5, though, is a peace that subdues those fears. It's a peace that should remind me that God isn't rewarding me with salvation, restoration, or redemption based on how many items I can check off a list or how many hours I spend in quiet time with Him daily.

This is the peace that comes with knowing Christ's sacrifice was and will continue to be enough.

This is the peace that comes with living a Spirit-filled life instead of a rule-abiding life.

Peace, Love, and Obedience

One of the biggest struggles I hear in the church is the struggle between freedom in Christ and obedience.

That's fair.

Just like most other things, though, this all points back to the big picture.

Paul talked about living a life led by the Spirit and how we can't live by both the Spirit and the flesh.

As Paul mentioned at the beginning of Galatians 5, freedom in Christ is not a license to do whatever we want. That's an important distinction here. We have freedom from the law, but we don't have freedom to do whatever the heck we want—that won't bring peace!

As cliché as this sounds, these truths are all rooted in our legitimate relationship with God as opposed to our commitment to following rules.

I know this is a long chunk of scripture, but Paul sums all of this up beautifully in Ephesians 4:

So I kneel humbly in awe before the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah, the perfect Father of every father and child in heaven and on the earth. And I pray that he would unveil within you the unlimited riches of his glory and favor until supernatural strength floods your innermost being with his divine might and explosive power.

Then, by constantly using your faith, the life of Christ will be released deep inside you, and the resting place of his love will become the very source and root of your life.

Then you will be empowered to discover what every holy one experiences—the great magnitude of the astonishing love of Christ in all its dimensions. How deeply intimate and far-reaching is his love! How enduring and inclusive it is! Endless love beyond measurement that transcends our understanding—this extravagant love pours into you until you are filled to overflowing with the fullness of God!

Never doubt God's mighty power to work in you and accomplish all this. He will achieve infinitely more than your greatest request, your most unbelievable dream, and exceed your wildest imagination! He will outdo them all, for his miraculous power constantly energizes you.

When we live in faith and allow the Spirit to guide our lives, we can discover the astonishing love of Christ in all its dimensions. We can rest in the assurance that God will achieve infinitely more than our greatest requests, our most unbelievable dreams, and our wildest imaginations.

That is a peace that subdues.

That's my prayer for you today, friend, that you will trade in your rules and regulations for a relationship that allows the Spirit to fill you and allows you to experience the astonishing love of Christ in all its dimensions. It's only then that you can truly experience this peace that subdues all your spiritual fears and anxieties.

Reflection Questions

1. When do you find yourself struggling the most with rules and regulations?
2. What is the biggest obstacle to peace in your life?
3. What can you do today to help you achieve that peace that subdues?

Prayer

— God, I pray today that you help me let go of any rules and regulations that might be holding me back from having true peace and freedom in you. I pray that you help me to see what obstacles are standing in the way of my peace, and you show me how I should remove them.

Day 36: Patience that Endures

But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.

— *Galatians 5:22 (TPT)*

I grew up in the country, the foothills of Appalachia.

We lived on a gravel road lined with corn fields for 25 yards and then giant pine trees for miles. My grandparents' home marked the delineation between the corn fields and the pine trees.

Immediately beyond their driveway was a small hill with a slight curve. When you were sitting on their porch, this was the view. We used to sit on that porch and drink Coke out of glass bottles while snapping so many green beans we were confident our fingers would have blisters the next day.

My grandpa was a fiery old man.

He hated how fast people drove up and down the road, and he was known to stand out by the road and yell at the cars that passed by—to no avail. They never slowed down.

He was not a patient man.

They say opposites attract, and this was surely the case with my grandparents. While my grandpa was a fiery impatient man who lived life in a constant state of anger, frustration, and discontent, my grandma was the picture of calm, contentment, and patience.

It's funny because when you're a kid, you don't always notice the patterns of dysfunction...or chaos... in your family.

I certainly didn't.

We spent our lives joking about Grandpa's behavior and wishing we could nominate my grandma for sainthood, but we never really talked about these behaviors, their consequences, etc.

Even as adults, the grandkids still look back on Grandpa's impatience and discontentment and kind of shake our heads saying, "he was something..."

It's only been in my adult years that I've really thought about the amount of patience my grandma had to have possessed to live and thrive in life with, and maybe even despite, my grandpa's attitude and behaviors.

When I first started studying patience as it pertains to the fruit of the spirit, I immediately thought of my grandma, and as I studied even more, I knew her picture should be beside the definition in the dictionary.

Patience that Endures

The fourth quality Paul mentions is patience. The word Paul used here is *makrothumia*. Translated, this means patience, forbearance, long-suffering, and slowness in avenging wrongs. Strong's defines this as a self-restraint that does not hastily retaliate against wrongs.

I have to constantly remind myself that this fruit of the spirit is not just a random quality we can claim to possess, but it is displayed in our actions because the fruit of the spirit is love in action.

Consequently, when we think about patience that endures (Galatians 5:22 TPT) in its original context, it looks a little different than what we traditionally think of when we think of patience.

I grew up hearing sermons and Sunday School lessons warning against ever praying for patience. For the majority of my adolescence, it was as if church leaders feared praying for patience because they claimed the only way for God to teach us patience was to assault us with plagues like we were Job during Satan's assault on him and his faith.

Maybe there is some truth to that, but as I've grown older, become a little more educated, and started to understand the character of God 1000 times better, I'm convinced this is another one of those adventures in missing the point.

Now, listen, I'm not saying the patience we've always known and talked about in church is a bad thing—after all, it's a virtue (or so I've been told for as long as I remember), but what I am saying is that there's another layer to the concept of patience that is the layer Paul was teaching about here.

This layer is one about avoiding retaliation. This layer is about enduring without vengeance. This layer is about not responding hastily. This layer is about truly living a life of love.

Patience vs. Vengeance

If I'm being completely honest with you, I have to admit that I am absolutely 100% not a vengeful person. Sometimes, I wish I had a little more of that kind of fire in me, but I just don't. Some people are great at coming up with ways to get back at other people, they can mastermind all sorts of strategic plans, and they plan the best pranks.

I am not that person. I never have been.

I grew up at the race track. My dad raced all sorts of dirt cars—wedge cars, late models, and modifieds. Race tracks and race car drivers can be brutal. They all seem to understand this concept of vengeance exceptionally well. Even with that as my childhood, I still can't wrap my head around what you ever gain from getting back at someone. What does that really accomplish?

In my experience with others, it seems to me that when people seek vengeance, they do so out of either hurt or anger, and they believe that their vengeance is going to:

Make them feel better because they have hurt someone else in the same way they were hurt

Give them power in the situation

Alleviate their own pain by inflicting pain on someone else

Take something away from someone who took something away from them

Embarrass someone else in the same way they were embarrassed

I'm sure this isn't an exhaustive list, but just looking at these few examples, what jumps out to you?

What jumps out to me about vengeance is that it always involves damaging someone else in an effort to build ourselves up.

Patience is the opposite of this.

Love in action is the opposite of this.

Here's why: Love never seeks to hurt someone else, to inflict pain on someone else, to take something from someone else, or to embarrass someone else.

Regardless of what they've done to us.

Patience that endures is an action that shows love by not seeking vengeance even when vengeance is understandable, deserved, etc.

Patience and Boundaries:

As I was studying this definition of patience, I found myself coming back over and over again to the idea of boundaries. Too often, I see people, especially church leaders/teachers, using the idea of patience for a variety of unhealthy reasons:

To guilt people into staying in toxic and destructive relationships

To keep people in a church with promises of future changes

To manipulate people into thinking a loved one will eventually change

To be clear here, this "patience" that Paul speaks about in Galatians 5:22 infers none of those things. It doesn't infer we should continue in unhealthy relationships. It doesn't infer we should continue attending toxic churches. It doesn't infer we should be doormats or sit idly by while we are mistreated.

What it does infer is that we need to be cautious not to respond too hastily with vengeance or retaliation when we've been wronged.

Notice it doesn't say not to respond at all.

No, the idea behind patience that endures is patience that keeps us from flying off the handle and seeking retribution, retaliation, or vengeance too hastily.

For example, my grandma could have easily flown off the handle and screamed at my grandpa every time he stood by the road and screamed at cars. She could have served him with a piece of his own medicine for embarrassing her by yelling at him in the exact same way he was yelling at everyone else.

How would that have helped, though?

It would have simply escalated the situation even more and left everyone in worse shape than they began.

A better way to deal with this might have been to speak to my grandpa about his actions and how they were affecting her, how they made her feel embarrassed, and how she would have liked for him to stop.

Would this have changed his behavior?

I can't tell you.

I can tell you, though, that would have been an example of love in action and the patience we see mentioned here in Galatians 5.

That's what we have to remember when we think about, teach about, and cultivate this aspect of a life lived with the guidance of the Spirit—love in action in all its various forms.

My prayer for you, friend, is that when you think about cultivating patience, you think about these things—that you focus on your own reactions to people and situations and how you can respond to them with love in action.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you the most about this definition of patience?
2. How likely are you to seek revenge when you've been wronged?
3. Is patience something that comes naturally to you, or is it something you need to continue to work on?

Prayer

— God, I pray today you help me to think about my reactions to people and situations and you reveal to me how I can respond to them with love in action.

Day 37: Kindness in Action

But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.

— *Galatians 5:22 (TPT)*

It's not uncommon for Kate to text me when she's at her dad's, out with friends, reading/watching Instagram Reels in her bedroom, or even sitting in the same room as me. Consequently, last week when I got a short little text from her, I wasn't surprised.

I opened the text and was informed that she was very angry.

Now, she's 17 and has a love affair with books, so it's not uncommon for me to get an angry text because of some plot twist in a book she's reading!

This is real life.

So, I still wasn't really overly concerned with what it was that had infuriated her—I can be equally infuriated by plot twists, character deaths, and villains in books as well. So, I get it.

Unfortunately, this was not a night where she was angry at an author or a character. This was a tough one.

Parenting is hard.

Parenting a child of divorce can be especially hard.

Parenting a child of divorce and attempting to show kindness in actions can feel nearly impossible.

For the next couple of hours, I attempted to watch tv with Russ while also reading and responding to Kate's outrage as judiciously as possible. Finally, after a couple of hours of attempting to be the voice of reason, responding with logic, and consistently encouraging her to write down her feelings and what happened to share with her counselor this week, she finally just came over—one of the only perks of living across the road from your ex-husband.

We sat for an hour as she vomited out her anger, hurt, and frustration, and offered her a safe place to listen without judgment, the hugs she really needed in that moment, and a little peace as she headed back across the road. My gut reaction in these situations is not kindness in action. It's outrage.

While I listen to her recount her hurt, her frustration, and her own outrage, my emotions run the gambit: I'm angry because that's my child. I'm triggered because I've lived in that house and experienced those same things. I'm heartbroken because she's hurting. I'm impressed because she's perceptive. I'm frustrated because I know some people will never change. I'm exasperated because I know no amount of love from us will make up for her experiences elsewhere.

It's exhausting. While it's easy to show kindness in action to her, it feels nearly impossible to show any kindness to those individuals causing her so much stress, anxiety, hurt, and anger.

I got up the next morning after sleeping very little, drank my coffee, spent some time with Jesus, and then sat down at my computer in an attempt to write about kindness. I promptly laughed out loud, shut my computer, and walked away for a few days—knowing I needed way more time with Jesus before tackling this subject. I've found He's like that sometimes.

The Root of Kindness

The fifth characteristic of a Spirit-filled life here is "kindness in action." This is translated from the Greek word "Chrēstotēs" which is defined as benignity, kindness, and usefulness. This is commonly connected to philanthropy and is the polar opposite of cutting something short. The most telling aspect of kindness, though, is this: "It is the grace which pervades the whole nature, mellowing all which would be harsh and austere." (The Complete Word Study Dictionary).

Kindness isn't simply paying for someone's coffee in the Tim Horton's line (although that's nice too); it's a grace that is so pervasive that it saturates our whole nature. It is a grace that is so saturating that it softens all our harsh and rigid places. It's the quality that allows you to look at:

Your ex's words and actions and feel pity, sympathy, and compassion because you see what a broken individual they are.

Your child's bully and see the pain in their heart and their lives.

The annoying coworker and understand they are a flawed human being just like the rest of us.

The "perfect" Pastor's wife and realize they are desperately trying to fit a part while falling apart inside.

Kindness is both a tolerance of others as well as a concern for the welfare of others

Kindness in Action

If you've been around here for a while, then you know I love The Passion Translation, and I especially love how it translates the fruit of the spirit as "Love in action." What's the point of all of this if our actions don't show love? We can talk theology, we can go to church, we can memorize our Bibles, but if we aren't so saturated with grace that our lives and actions are love and kindness in action, then I dare say we have missed the point entirely.

And, friends, that can be hard. I wish I could sit here and tell you I am the epitome of love and kindness in action 100% of the time, but that would be a lie. What I can tell you, though, is that these are qualities I want desperately to continue cultivating in my soul because until we cultivate these qualities in our hearts and souls, we'll struggle to display them authentically in our actions.

There's part of me that wants to give you a list right now of "5 ways to cultivate kindness in action," but then there's the realistic side of me who knows that the only way to cultivate kindness in action is to seek the Spirit of God and allow it to penetrate your heart and saturate your soul.

Instead of giving you a how-to list, I want to leave you with some questions to help you self-assess:

When you are annoyed by a coworker, how do you react?

When someone hurts you or your family member, how do you respond to them?

When you disagree with someone's theology, what do you do?

When you see a homeless person on the street corner, what's your gut reaction?

When someone has more than you, what is your response to their success?

When your kid doesn't get as much playing time as their teammates, what is your reaction?

When someone points at your flaws, how do you handle it?

When you are passed over for a promotion, what do you do?

My gut reactions aren't always kind, they aren't always tolerant, they don't always show a concern for the welfare of others. Sometimes, my heart definitely shows how it's become hardened from life, but I know God's desire for me is that my heart be softened and saturated with grace again.

Friend, I pray today that you are encouraged to take a look at your own heart, your own families, and your own churches and think about how saturated they are with grace. Are they places of kindness in action, or are they hardened to the world and to others?

Reflection Questions

1. What is one aspect of your life that needs to be saturated with grace?
2. How well do your faith communities display kindness in action?
3. What is your biggest struggle when it comes to kindness?

Prayer

— God, I pray for encouragement today. I pray you help me examine my own heart, my families, and my church. Help me to remember grace. Help me to truly be the person who exemplifies kindness in action.

Day 38: Active Goodness

But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.

— *Galatians 5:22 (TPT)*

Before her senior year, Kate and I went on a tour of colleges. It was fascinating listening to all of the Admission Officers throwing their best sales pitches at us, walking campus with the students who have been trained to say all the right things, and visiting the Residence Halls that reminded me of all the joys and frustrations of residential college life.

One thing that was noticeably absent on all the campuses she chose was the required chapel attendance I came to loathe during my college days.

When I was college shopping as a high school student, I was convinced I wanted to go to a Christian College. Even though I had never attended a Christian school, I had this skewed belief that attending a Christian College would be like 36 straight weeks of church camp.

I was young and dumb—what can I say?

While some folks thought the mandatory chapel attendance was horrible, I wasn't really fazed by the thought of it at first. After all, I was raised in a church where your holiness and jewels in your crown in heaven were tied directly to your church attendance every time the doors were open.

As someone who grew up in a performance-based theology, attending chapel three times a week was simply another item to check off my checklist. It was one more thing that contributed to my status as a "good Christian," a "good student," and a "good girl."

Except that it wasn't.

At all.

Like anything that is forced, chapel became just another slot in my day, an annoying slot in my day where I found ways to sneak my textbooks into my seat so I could attempt to get caught up on my ridiculous amount of assigned reading for my literature classes. Sitting in that seat did not reflect my "goodness" at all. It reflected my ability to follow rules and to keep track of my chapel skips for the semester.

It is so easy to fall into that "goodness" mindset, though, isn't it? We hear scriptures like Galatians 5:22-23 where Paul explains the fruit of the spirit, and we immediately associate the idea of "goodness" with our skewed definitions of what it is to be a "good girl," a "good Christian," or a "good person." I have to admit that this one is hard for me. As a professed exvangelical who is still attempting to recover from the doctrine of Christian perfection, checklists, performances, traditions, and rituals, this idea of "goodness" is one that is close to my heart and soul.

At the strangest times, I find myself triggered by those old thoughts of not being “good enough,” of needing to do more so God will love me and bless me more, and of the potential of God punishing me because I’m not “good enough.” If, like me, this idea of “goodness” as a fruit of the spirit has kept you captive in a prison of comparison, fear, and performance, take heart, my friend, I have good news for you.

Biblical Goodness

Today, we’re looking at what The Passion Translation refers to as “a life of virtue” and what many other translations refer to as “goodness.” The Greek word Paul used here is *agathosune*. The root of *agathosune* is *agathos* which can be defined as benevolent, profitable, and benefiting others. *Agathosune* refers to active goodness, virtue, excellence, or beneficence. It’s fully expressed through willingly and sacrificially doing for others. It is both moral and spiritual excellence that manifests in kindness to others. It is characterized by an interest in the welfare of others.

That’s a lot, right?

And probably not at all what we’ve ever really thought about when we think of “goodness.”

As I’ve been studying Paul’s letter to the Galatians, there is a clear theme throughout that distinctly separates those who live for self and those who live in the Spirit, and it is as simple as our attitudes and treatment of others.

The goodness Paul is referring to here is not about how "good" we are. It doesn't reflect:

Our chapel/church attendance

Our performances

Our daily quiet time

Our volunteer hours

Our bible study

No, the goodness Paul is referring to, the life of virtue he is teaching about is a life that is actively, willingly, and sacrificially concerned for the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being of others.

Active Goodness

What sets agathosune apart is that it's an active goodness.

Active goodness is more than just:

Thinking good thoughts about someone

Telling a friend you'll pray for them

Saying something nice about a sermon

Acknowledging a need

Going to church

Reading the Bible

Feeling sympathy for a tragedy

Being outraged by bigotry

Active goodness is taking the next step.

It involves willing and sacrificial behavior instead of just thoughts.

Active goodness might look like:

Dropping off groceries to the family who just endured a loss

Buying the homeless guy on the corner a meal without your judgment or a sermon

Actively participating in projects for change

Teaching/actively participating in the bible study

Modeling Jesus to your children

Seeing a need and then filling the need

Shutting down hate when you hear it

Listening to the nudge of the Holy Spirit

For so many years of my life, I was stuck in this belief system that told me my goodness was about the ways I was performing—in school, in church, at home, at work, etc. It was connected to the boxes I could tick off in my private life:

My prayer life

My quiet time

My bible reading

And it was connected to what I was contributing to the faith community as a whole:

My volunteering

My teaching

My leading

My participation

My presence

The reality, though, is that this active goodness Paul is talking about here in Galatians isn't about any of these things at all. It's about my ability to see the needs of people and to actively, willingly, and sacrificially meet those needs.

Individual vs. Corporate Active Goodness

One thing I think we have to be aware of when we're actively involved in a faith community is substituting service in that community for active goodness toward others. As I think back over the years I spent serving in church, I can honestly say now that I saw my hours of service to the church as a whole as enough. I thought it was enough to serve the church at large instead of meeting the needs of individuals.

It's easy to make the argument that we're serving a multitude of people when we serve in the church, but the more I study Paul's words and Jesus's example, the more I see the importance of both seeing and working to actively meet the needs of individuals—all individuals, not just those inside the walls of the church.

Organized religion and faith communities can blind us to the lives of virtue we need to live through our goodness in action every day of the week and not just on Sunday mornings if we aren't careful and aware. There is a place for work in a faith community. Don't get me wrong. But, a life lived in the Spirit is a life lived actively pursuing the well-being of those inside those four walls and beyond them as well. I know that's a reminder I need often, and I'm not too proud to admit that!

Friend, I pray the Holy Spirit begins to nudge you and show you how to actively meet the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical needs of others.

Reflection Questions

1. How well do you practice goodness in action?
2. What is easier for you—serving individuals with needs or working in a faith community?
3. What is one way you can be more aware of the needs around you this week?

Prayer

— God, I pray that you help me see those around me who need me and who I can serve. I pray that you help me to have a heart full of goodness that actively wants to help others this week.

Day 39: Gentleness of Spirit

But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.

— *Galatians 5:22 (TPT)*

Moving sucks.

In case you haven't moved in a long time, let me be the one to remind you how awful it is.

The packing.

The boxes.

The furniture.

The pizza and beer you buy all your friends to bribe them to help you.

Before we were married and at the height of the housing market boom, we saw a prime opportunity to sell Russ's house. That meant moving him out and doing some upgrades to get the best price and return on his investment.

Now, I'm not a "sit back and watch" kind of human being.

I've never been overly traditionally "girly." I've renovated houses, worked on race cars, ridden (and wrecked) dirt bikes, built furniture, hung drywall, etc... Suffice it to say—not much intimidates me.

We were to the point of moving the big, heavy furniture out of the house. We were both working during the day, leaving only evenings and weekends for us to conquer these tasks. Consequently, it was an evening after work one day when we took on the task of moving the furniture.

The enclosed trailer was parked outside of the house, and the two of us set out to get the furniture out.

It was hot, the furniture was heavy, and there were steps.

Disaster waiting to happen.

We got some of the smaller items outside with no issue.

The only stuff left to load up were the big items, and our communication was not stellar at this point in the evening. I thought we were going one way; Russ thought we were going the other way, and before I realized what was happening, Russ loudly communicated his frustration and which way I was supposed to be moving (read—he bit my head off).

I remember the face I made at him and the tilt of my head that non-verbally communicated "you did not just say that to me."

Clearly, I didn't communicate it well, though, because within the next couple of hours, we had several other similar "communications."

I was ticked.

This was 100% not the way I communicated.

We finished loading the furniture and arrived at our destination, and I very calmly explained that if he ever talked to me like that again, it would be the last time he communicated with me. Crickets. Deer in the headlights. Followed by excessive apologies.

Sometimes I forget he was in the Marine Corps, and sometimes I think he forgot I was not!

While it was not fun at the time, it was a great learning experience for both of us. He didn't even realize that the way he was communicating with me was something I would be triggered and ticked off by, and I didn't realize that he communicated a little more harshly than me when he was under extreme amounts of stress.

Honestly, it was an easy fix, but in order to fix it, I had to explain my expectations and how I was raised to communicate with the people I love—through gentleness.

It seemed like a no-brainer to me because I was raised by parents who didn't yell or even raise their voices with me. They tried not to break my spirit with their words, which are qualities I've transferred into my adult life (or at least I strive for in my adult life). Now, don't get me wrong, we had some heated discussions around the dinner table when I was a kid, and my mom would inevitably end up getting mad, crying, and leaving at times, but we didn't yell, darn it!

Anyway, after one highly dysfunctional marriage, I wasn't about to entertain another one, so it was paramount to me to nip this in the bud and get on the same page with Russ regarding how we would communicate and why gentleness was essential to me.

And, we did, after this very uncomfortable learning opportunity! Gentleness is important in our words and our actions. When Paul talks about gentleness as part of the fruit of the spirit, he's talking about so much more than just speaking calmly and rationally with our loved ones, though.

Gentleness: A Word Without Translation

Translations are tricky.

Sometimes there are exact translations from Greek to English words, which makes it a little easier. Other times, there aren't exact English translations from Greek, and this happens to be one of those times.

The Greek word Paul used in Galatians 5:23 that many translators translate as gentleness is *prautes*. I've read so much about this, so I'll do my best here to break this down!

Some of the key characteristics of prautes are:

The quality of not being overly impressed with a sense of self-importance

A quality of gentle friendliness

Consideration

Restrained patience

Controlled strength

The ability to provide a soothing influence to an angry individual

The opposite of arrogance

The quality of a person whose feelings and emotions are under perfect control

As I've mentioned so many times in this series, so much of Paul's teaching in this letter relates to our relationships and interactions with other people. While it might seem strange to think of gentleness in relation to other people instead of only a quality in us—like love, kindness, patience, and goodness—gentleness also seems to be something that is a product of a life lived in the Spirit that is both in us and exudes from us.

In fact, The Passion Translation refers to prautes as gentleness of heart.

Looking over those qualities of prautes, most of them start in our hearts and manifest in our actions. If you had asked me before I studied this topic what I thought gentleness was, I would have said an action—how we treat and speak to people. The more I've studied this, though, the more it's become evident that the gentleness Paul was speaking of is first a humility and meekness of the heart and then an action.

Gentleness in Action

Of all the different characteristics Paul mentions in Galatians 5, I tend to think gentleness is the biggest struggle for our world today. Traditionally, gentleness is not something that is lauded or encouraged—especially in men (thanks for that, gender stereotypes). In fact, it tends to be in direct opposition to everything our society pushes today.

Instead of not being overly impressed with self, self-promotion is encouraged.

Instead of gentle friendliness, it's a dog-eat-dog world.

Instead of consideration for others, we're encouraged to only worry about ourselves. Instead of restrained patience, we have instant gratification.

Instead of controlled strength, we have YOLO and Carpe Diem.

Instead of soothing an angry individual, we use social media to fight and argue even more. Instead of humility, arrogance is disguised as "confidence."

Instead of keeping our feelings and emotions in control, we use every platform we have to spew them.

Sadly, when we do practice these qualities of gentleness, society labels us as weak or passive. The reality is that practicing gentleness in action doesn't make us weak at all—just the opposite.

A gentle heart is a strong heart.

A gentle person is a strong person.

Being gentle doesn't mean we aren't strong; being gentle means that we know how to control our strength and power instead of lording it over others or abusing it.

Our partners

Our kids

Our coworkers

The people in the comments of social media posts

Our church folks

Politicians on the other side of the aisle

People we disagree with

Unfortunately for us, there aren't any asterisks attached to the fruit of the spirit that allows us to exclude certain individuals or groups of people from our love, kindness, goodness, patience, and gentleness.

That means we have to rethink our words and actions in relation to society's expectations.

It means we don't get to go all Marine Corps on people when we're angry, frustrated, or under stress.

It means we have to rethink how we act when our kid doesn't get to play as much as we think they should.

It means we have to quit spewing hate in the name of politics and especially the name of Jesus. |

It means we have to defuse situations instead of adding fuel to them.

It means we have to stop yelling to be heard.

That's what gentleness in action looks like.

Obviously, that's not a comprehensive list, and your own life probably has different areas where you struggle to practice gentleness, but I pray this allows you to start thinking about what it means to cultivate a heart of gentleness so you can foster a life of gentleness as well.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your biggest internal struggle when it comes to having gentleness of heart?
2. What are your triggers? What makes you lose control and struggle with gentleness in action?
3. Who do you struggle with the most when it comes to controlling your strength and power?

Prayer

— God, I pray you would help my heart to be gentle. I pray that you would help me to see my triggers and understand what makes me lose control and struggle with my own gentleness. I pray that you would help me continue to cultivate gentleness in all areas of my life.

Week 6: After God's Own Heart

1. Day 40: Unworthy (Palm Sunday)
2. Day 41: Unqualified
3. Day 42: You aren't too Broken
4. Day 43: You aren't Damned by your Past.
5. Day 44: Humility and Servanthood (Maundy Thursday)
6. Day 45: Choosing God isn't Always Easy (The Crucifixion)
7. Day 46: The Darkest Day
8. Day 47: Chase God's Goodness (The Resurrection)



Day 40: Unworthy (Palm Sunday)

Then an exceptionally large crowd gathered and carpeted the road before him with their cloaks and prayer shawls. Others cut down branches from trees to spread in his path. Jesus rode in the center of the procession—crowds going before him and crowds coming behind him, and they all shouted, “Bring the victory, Lord, Son of David! He is the blessed one sent from the Lord Yahweh! We celebrate with praises to God in the highest!”

— *Matthew 21:8*

Matthew 21:8-11 (TPT)

Matthew 21:8-11 (TPT) Then an exceptionally large crowd gathered and carpeted the road before him with their cloaks and prayer shawls. Others cut down branches from trees to spread in his path. Jesus rode in the center of the procession—crowds going before him and crowds coming behind him, and they all shouted, “Bring the victory, Lord, Son of David! He is the blessed one sent from the Lord Yahweh! We celebrate with praises to God in the highest!”

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people went wild with excitement—the entire city was thrown into an uproar! Some asked, “Who is this man?” And the crowds shouted back, “This is Jesus! He’s the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee!”

If you think back through the week, the underlying current in all our time together has really been to shift our thinking, and at the root of that thinking is gratitude.

Scripture is full of gratitude references, and they come from all types of people from all walks of life facing all sorts of situations. What they have in common is that the foundation of our everyday needs to be gratitude—not worry.

I can't help but think of Paul. He explains in II Corinthians 2:5 (TPT) that:

We've been beaten many times, imprisoned, and found ourselves in the midst of riots. We've endured many troubles, had sleepless nights, and gone hungry.

And, yet, in the New Testament, it's Paul who encourages gratefulness over and over again.

In I Thessalonians 5:16-18 (TPT), Paul says:

Let joy be your continual feast. Make your life a prayer. And in the midst of everything be always giving thanks, for this is God's perfect plan for you in Christ Jesus.

And, then again in Colossians 3:15 (TPT), Paul reminds the church to:

Let your heart be always guided by the peace of the Anointed One, who called you to peace as part of his one body. And always be thankful.

Today let's talk Palm Sunday. It's the day when we remember these events Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a Donkey as a large crowd gathered to yell praises, encouragement, and express their belief in him—likely the same crowd who would support Christ's crucifixion only days later.

I've always struggled with this—how quickly the crowd changed from adoring worshippers to a violent mob.

Then, I'm reminded of their humanity, of our humanity.

How quickly do we do the same thing through our words, thoughts, and actions?

This is the last week of our study. As we inch closer to our remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection this week, I want us to spend time really striving to chase after God's own heart.

I've always heard the term “man after God's own heart” applied to David because of Paul's words in Acts 13:22 (TPT)

After removing him, God raised up David to be king, for God said of him, 'I have found in David, son of Jesse, a man who always pursues my heart and will accomplish all that I have destined him to do.'

It's easy to read Paul's words here and think about the amazing things David did in his life—slay Goliath as a teenager with a few stones and a slingshot, comfort Saul with his music, lead God's people as their king, dance in his underwear at the sight of the ark of the covenant, pen half the psalms, further the lineage that would eventually be Jesus's ancestors.

We see David's list of accomplishments and read his prayer/poetry, and it is easy to understand how he was a man after God's own heart.

But, then there's everything else David had on his resume...

He saw Bathsheba and wanted her for himself, so he took her.

He fathered a child with Bathsheba.

He had Bathsheba's husband killed.

He issued a census when God told him not to.

He had 8 wives.

As humans, we only really need to see one of these actions to disqualify David. I'm sure you can think of someone in the church or ministry right now who has sinned and been disqualified by a church to serve.

But, God.

I Samuel 16:7 reminds us:

God judges persons differently than humans do. Men and women look at the face; God looks into the heart.

We look at people's actions and appearances, but God sees hearts.

God saw David's heart.

I can't say everything that God saw in David's heart, but it is clear through David's remorse, his gut-wrenching psalms, and his repentance that God saw an imperfect man whose desire was ultimately the will of God, despite David's various detours off the best route.

Throughout scripture, we see examples of David's brokenness and his repentance. We see how he owns his mistakes, repents, and attempts to follow God's guidance. David loves God, but he also respects his word and his law.

We see this throughout his prayers as they are recorded in the psalms.

Psalms 51 and 119 are emotional admissions of David's guilt and prayer for forgiveness, while Psalm 119 is a declaration of David's love for God's word and law.

What would have happened if instead of acknowledging his failures and shortcomings in order to grow and fulfill God's will for his life, David would have disappeared, gone back to being a shepherd, and believed the lie that he was unworthy of God's calling on his life?

It's hard to even think about the consequences that would have had.

None of us are worthy of the calling God has placed on our lives. None of us.

Sometimes, it's easier to focus on our failures and turn our backs on God's calling for our lives than it is to acknowledge our failures, accept God's calling and desire to use us, and continue to chase after God's own heart.

That's never God's will for us.

God wants us to chase after his heart, regardless of our failures, just like David did.

Maybe today you are feeling unworthy, you are feeling like there is too much junk in your past or your closet or maybe even in your present to chase after God's heart and be used by him.

David is proof that isn't true.

My hope for you today is that you remember the story of David and it encourages you to realize God wants to use you too. He wants you to chase his heart and be like the crowd that gathered on Palm Sunday, not the crowd that gathered to crucify him.

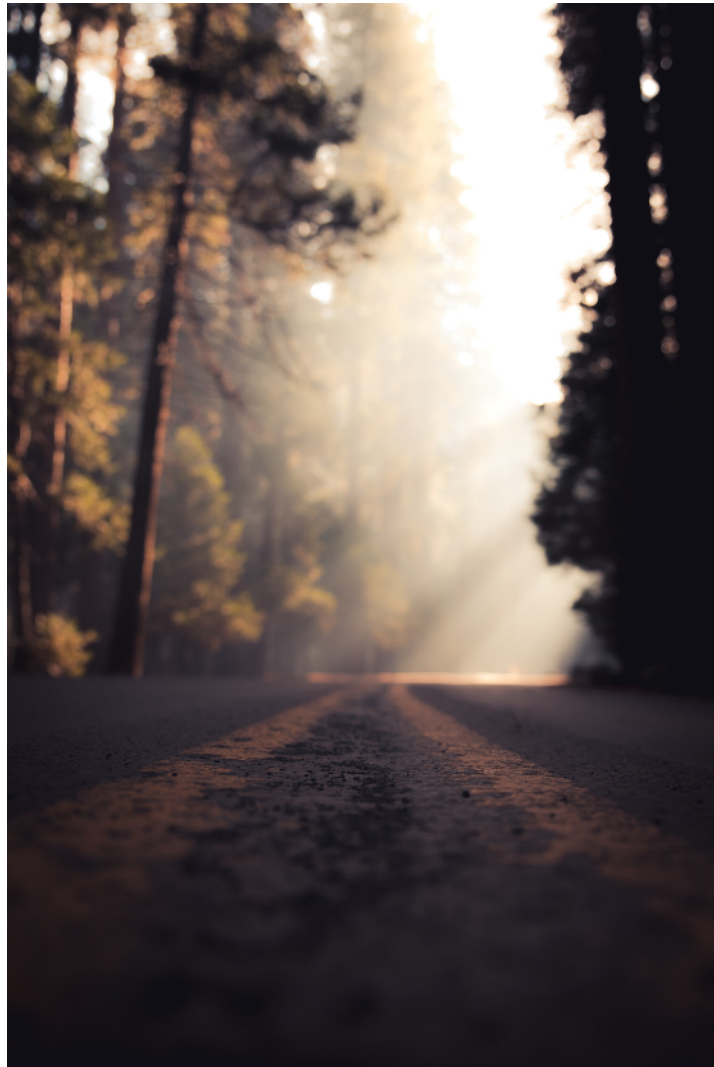
That's how God wants us to live every day, and I pray you begin or continue your chase after his heart today.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you felt unworthy in your life?
2. How does the story of David encourage you?
3. What is one step you can take toward allowing God to use you like he used David?

Prayer

— God, I know that none of us are worthy, yet you want to use us anyway. Sometimes I struggle with shame and regret over choices I've made, but I know that your grace and mercy covers all of them. I pray that you would help me to remember that you are in the business of forgiveness and that you use all kinds of people. Remind me that you have plans for me, but it is up to me to choose to chase after them and to chase after your heart.



Day 41: Unqualified:

Jesus replied, “You don’t know what you are asking.” Then, looking in the eyes of Jacob and John, Jesus said, “Are you prepared to drink from the cup of suffering that I am about to drink? And are you able to endure the baptism into death that I am about to endure?”

— *Matthew 20:24*

When I was a little girl in the church, I remember hearing about Jesus’s 12 disciples and thinking about what amazing, respectable, intelligent, and successful men they must have been. Whenever my Sunday School teachers would pull out the flannel graph and illustrate stories of Jesus, the disciples were always these burly, strong, middle-aged men who supported Jesus in everything he did.



It wasn't until many years later that I learned who the disciples really were.
Teenagers.

Uneducated teenagers.

Teenagers who were mostly fishermen.

Oh, and a tax collector who was probably one of the only disciples who could write.

And, then throw in a Zealot—or a man so devoted to the law, he would have killed for his loyalty to Israel.

These were not exactly well-respected, overly qualified men.

Of course, you would think these guys had it all figured out after spending three years with Jesus during his ministry.

Nope.

Yesterday, we read about the crowds cheering for Jesus on Palm Sunday, but here's the scenario that played out in the previous chapter.

Even though Jesus had already prophesied his death to his disciples, he tries to explain it again as recorded in Matthew 20:17-19 (TPT):

Jesus was about to go to Jerusalem, so he took his twelve disciples aside privately and said to them, "Listen to me. We're on our way to Jerusalem, and I need to remind you that the Son of Man will be handed over to the religious leaders and scholars, and they will sentence him to be executed. And they will hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, tortured, and crucified. Yet three days later he will be raised to life again."

Jesus was pretty straightforward here—explaining to the disciples specifically what was about to happen. If I were in this audience, I can't imagine the questions I would have or the emotion I would be feeling. This is what happens with the disciples, though: (Matthew 20:20-24 TPT)

The wife of Zebedee approached Jesus with her sons, Jacob and John. She knelt before him and asked him for a favor.

He said to her, "What is it that you want?"

She answered, "Make the decree that these, my sons, will rule with you in your kingdom—one sitting on your right hand, one on your left."

Jesus replied, "You don't know what you are asking." Then, looking in the eyes of Jacob and John, Jesus said, "Are you prepared to drink from the cup of suffering that I am about to drink? And are you able to endure the baptism into death that I am about to endure?"

They answered him, "Yes, we are able."

"You will indeed drink the cup of my suffering and be immersed into my death," Jesus told them.

"But to be the ones who sit at the place of highest honor is not mine to decide. My Father is the one who chooses them and prepares them."

The other ten disciples were listening to all of this, and a jealous anger arose among them against the two brothers.

Jesus just told his disciples that he was about to be crucified and rise again. Jacob and John's mom, though, wants her sons to sit at the right and left hand of Christ when he rises, so that is the proposition she goes to Jesus with. Jacob and John don't hold her back. They don't disagree with her at all. In fact, they think it is a great idea and encourage Jesus to do it as well. Clearly, they have no idea what they are asking or what is about to happen to all of them.

It wasn't just these two who were focused on the wrong things! When the other disciples heard what the brothers were proposing, they were filled with jealous anger!

These weren't random folks who just happened to sit down with Jesus and listen to him.

These were the men who had been traveling with Jesus and who had been part of his ministry for three years.

These men were the confidants and best friends of Christ.

And, they were flawed humans.

Just like us.

Yesterday, we talked about the fact that none of us is worthy, that it's only by the grace and mercy of God that we are forgiven and called. While accepting that is the first step to truly chasing after God's own heart, the next step is to understand that none of us are qualified on our own.

If our strength came from ourselves, we wouldn't need Christ at all.

So many times, we discount ourselves for something God is calling us to do because we don't feel qualified to be successful. The disciples weren't qualified either, yet after the death and resurrection, God used them in miraculous ways to spread and further his kingdom.

We aren't any different from the disciples.

God wants to use us to further his kingdom as well.

It's time we quit using our feelings of inadequacy as obstacles to our chase after God's own heart.

We don't have to have it all figured out. Shoot, we don't even have to know what the next step is. We just have to be open to God's leading and his heart and be willing to follow his direction in our lives.

That's my prayer for you today: that you would see God's fingerprints on you and know that he wants to use you to further his kingdom if you simply open your heart to it and quit doubting your qualifications and abilities.

Chase after God's heart despite your own insecurities.

Reflection Questions

1. How does your own doubt about your qualifications or inadequacies interfere with your quest to chase after God's heart?
2. When has that doubt really been an obstacle in your life?
3. Take a few minutes today to lay your insecurities and feelings of inadequacy at the feet of your Father.

Prayer

— God, I know that you want to use me, despite my weaknesses. I know that you can and will give me the strength I need to accomplish any task you place before me. I'm sorry for the times my own insecurities have created obstacles in my relationship with you and my willingness to do your will. God, help me to remember that I am not enough on my own, but that you will make me enough every time. Help me to remember that your strength is made perfect in every one of my weaknesses.

Day 42: You aren't too Broken

Now, if anyone is enfolded into Christ, he has become an entirely new person. All that is related to the old order has vanished. Behold, everything is fresh and new.

— *II Corinthians 5:17*

I admire artists.

I went to one of those paint-and-sip nights once, and that is the closest I've ever come to any type of visual artistry. If I'm being really honest, my painting looked like something a kindergartener created.

Whatever—I know my limits.

Since I understand my extensive limitations where painting is concerned, I tried pottery once. Okay, actually my husband enrolled us in a pottery class for our first Valentine's Day together. So, I think maybe he had visions of those steamy scenes from "Ghost" in mind, but I can assure you that is not what happened.

You know those times you go to try something new and the instructor promises you that it isn't that hard and you will definitely go home with something you created? That was the promise we received on entering this class.

She broke her promise that day.

I am a bit of a perfectionist.

I don't like being bad at things.

And, I definitely don't like out-and-out failure.

That's how I would describe this pottery class experience for me.

But, hey, memories, right?

If my horrible creations would have made it into the kiln (which they didn't), the results would have been terrible. They would have come out in nothing more than exploded broken pieces.

Broken pieces of pottery actually have a name—potsherds.

While these broken pieces are of little use on their own, they actually have the potential to serve a greater purpose.

Potters can take the potsherds and grind them down into dust. Then, it's from that dust that new clay is created.

From that clay, brand-new creations are born.

Have you felt like those broken, misshapen pieces of pottery that seem to be broken beyond repair?

I have.

When we are facing complete brokenness, we have a choice—

- We can stay broken.
- We can allow our pieces to be ground to dust to allow the potter to create a brand-new masterpiece.

Our feelings of brokenness can be insurmountable walls keeping us from truly chasing after God's heart. These feelings can make us feel hopeless and completely alone. Many times, it is shame from that brokenness that keeps us isolated and feeling like we can never be good enough to be close to God and definitely not good enough to be used by God.

That is a lie of the devil.

Romans 3:10-12 (TPT) is quick to remind us that there is no one who is perfect and no one who is righteous:

*There is no one who always does what is right,
no, not even one!*

*There is no one with true spiritual insight,
and there is no one who seeks after God alone.*

*All have deliberately wandered from God's ways.
All have become depraved and unfit.
Kindness has disappeared from them all,
not even one is good.*

Sometimes people in churches are quick to forget this, aren't they?

Let's make sure we don't forget it.

Let's make sure we remember that we all are broken individuals who desperately need Jesus. Paul addresses this very thing in II Corinthians 5:17 (TPT):

Now, if anyone is enfolded into Christ, he has become an entirely new person. All that is related to the old order has vanished. Behold, everything is fresh and new.

It is only by grace and through the sacrifice of Christ that each one of us is made into a brand new creation—just like the masterpieces that are created from the dust of those broken pieces of pottery. The original piece of pottery is no longer recognizable, just like we are no longer recognizable when God takes that dust from our old selves and creates us as his new creation.

This isn't a concept that is new or foreign to God. This is literally the process God used to create Adam.

Genesis 2:7 (NIV) explains how:

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

It was from dust that God first created man, and it will be from the dust of your brokenness that God recreates you into a brand new creation.

You can never be too broken for God.

If you have this lingering feeling like you are too far gone or too far broken to refresh your faith or grow in your relationship with God, I hope you have found encouragement today to overcome that.

Reflection Questions

1. When has there been a time when you felt you were too broken for God?
2. What is your gut reaction to knowing everyone has failed and that God wants to make you a new creation?
3. What is one thing you can do this week to allow yourself to be made whole into a new creation?

Prayer

— God, I know you are the potter and you desperately want to make me a masterpiece. Help me to let go of my brokenness and allow you to grind my broken pieces into dust you can use to create me as a brand new work of art. God, help me to get out of your way and to allow you to work. Remind me every day that I am your brand-new creation and not the sum total of my brokenness.



Day 43: You aren't Damned by your Past.

We are quick to accept God's forgiveness, but we aren't always as quick to forgive ourselves. After all, we are hardest on ourselves most of the time.

— Kristen Neighbarger

This week, we've spent a lot of time thinking about the things that can be obstacles to truly chasing after God. I want to close that chapter today by talking about one final obstacle.

Your Past.

We are quick to accept God's forgiveness, but we aren't always as quick to forgive ourselves. After all, we are hardest on ourselves most of the time, right?

I want to take a few minutes today to think about some people who could have easily found themselves unable to forgive themselves and stay stuck in a place separated from God and intimacy with him. These folks didn't do that, though.

They forgave themselves and went on to play major roles in God's plans.

First, I want to look at the guy I've probably quoted the most throughout this study.

Paul, formerly known as Saul.

Paul's accomplishments after his conversion on the road to Damascus are miraculous.

- He penned 13 ½ books of the New Testament
- He went on a mission to preach in Syria and Cilicia
- He started churches in what is now Asia Minor
- He planted churches in Europe
- He ministered to the Gentiles
- He was beaten and imprisoned multiple times due to his ministry

We can't forget who Paul was before his conversion:

- He was a Pharisee
- He traveled from town to town, destroying those Jews who believed Christ was the Messiah
- He was the best Jew and Pharisee of his generation
- He persecuted Christians
- He was present and held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen

Talk about a man who could have been haunted by his past.

Paul could have easily been overcome by the guilt from his past, he could have easily found himself hung up on the inability to forgive himself. Instead, he accepted the grace of God, the forgiveness and freedom that comes with that, and the call to follow God's leading.

Because Paul was able to move beyond his past, God used him in miraculous ways.

Where would we be if Paul had refused that call?

Paul wasn't the only individual God used in spite of their questionable pasts. There are only 5 women named in the genealogy of Jesus: Ruth, Rahab, Bathsheba, Tamar, and Mary. While Ruth and Mary aren't shrouded in as much mystery, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Tamar are all women with some...baggage.

Rahab was the prostitute who saved Joshua's spies in Jericho. Due to her role in their safety, God saved her from the ultimate destruction of the city. As a result, Rahab and her family were incorporated into the nation of Israel, and she becomes a named ancestor of Christ.

What would have happened if Rahab wouldn't have been able to see past her occupation? If she wasn't able to move past her lifestyle?

Because of her ability to forgive herself, to change her ways, and to move forward, she became part of the nation of Israel and part of the lineage of Christ.

Rahab wasn't the only woman with a story mentioned in the lineage, though. Bathsheba is also mentioned. David had 8 wives, but it was from Bathsheba that Jesus's ancestral line derives. Bathsheba could have easily holed herself up in her house and refused to ever forgive herself or move on from her adulterous relationship with David that ultimately resulted in the death of her husband and child. She didn't do that, though. Instead, she moved on. She raised children, children who would ultimately be in the bloodline of Christ.

We can't forget about Tamar. Tamar's story is probably one of the most bizarre stories in the bible. Tamar was married. God killed her husband because he was evil. Then, she had to marry her brother-in-law, as was customary. He wouldn't have children with her, and God saw that as evil. God killed her second husband too. Then, she should have married the other brother, but their father refused. Years later, widowed and alone, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and sought out her former father-in-law. He didn't recognize her, slept with her, and got her pregnant. She kept some of his possessions to prove he was the father. Ultimately, he felt guilty, confessed his sins, and she had his twins. David is a descendant of one of her twins, thus Jesus is a descendant as well.

And you think your past is complicated?

Our humanity lends itself to guilt.

God lends himself to grace, though.

If your past is what is standing between you and a refresh of your faith and intimacy with God, I pray today is the day you forgive yourself and allow yourself to feel the freedom of forgiveness and of moving forward in intimacy with God.

Reflection Questions

1. What are you struggling to forgive yourself for?
2. What about yourself do you feel is too complicated for God?
3. Take a few minutes today and lay those at the feet of Jesus, asking God to help you forgive yourself.

Prayer

— God, I know your grace is enough for me. Sometimes, I just struggle with forgiving myself, even though I know you have forgiven me. Help me to lay down all my complications and past experiences that are interfering with my intimacy with you. Help me to remember I've laid them down and not try to pick them back up so you can use me how you desire.



Day 44: Humility and Servanthood: Maundy Thursday

“You’ve called me your teacher and lord, and you’re right, for that’s who I am. So if I’m your teacher and lord and have just washed your dirty feet, then you should follow the example that I’ve set for you and wash one another’s dirty feet. Now do for each other what I have just done for you. I speak to you timeless truth: a servant is not superior to his master, and an apostle is never greater than the one who sent him. So now put into practice what I have done for you, and you will experience a life of happiness enriched with untold blessings!”

— John 20:12-17 (TPT)

John 13:1-5

Jesus knew that the night before Passover would be his last night on earth before leaving this world to return to the Father’s side. All throughout his time with his disciples, Jesus had demonstrated a deep and tender love for them. And now he longed to show them the full measure of his love. Before their evening meal had begun, the accuser had already deeply embedded betrayal into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon.

Now Jesus was fully aware that the Father had placed all things under his control, for he had come from God and was about to go back to be with him. So he got up from the meal and took off his outer robe, and took a towel and wrapped it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' dirty feet and dry them with his towel.

Today let's talk Maundy Thursday—a name the church has assigned to the Thursday before Easter as a commemoration of Jesus's last supper. John records the events of this evening, and the details paint a descriptive picture for us of Jesus and his disciples.

Even though Jesus had predicted his death to his disciples, they still weren't able to fully grasp everything that was about to happen.

But, Jesus knew.

He longed to show these men who had been with him for three years the full measure of his love—even Judas Iscariot, whose heart Satan had already infiltrated.



Before their last supper together, Jesus sits down and begins washing the feet of his disciples. This was the supreme act of humility and servanthood, as this would have typically been a dirty and lowly task of a servant. After all, these were men who traveled on dirt roads in sandals. In no way was this a glorious or respected task. Instead, it was truly the supreme act of humility.

After Jesus washed their feet, he explained (John 20: 12-17 TPT)

"You've called me your teacher and lord, and you're right, for that's who I am. So if I'm your teacher and lord and have just washed your dirty feet, then you should follow the example that I've set for you and wash one another's dirty feet. Now do for each other what I have just done for you. I speak to you timeless truth: a servant is not superior to his master, and an apostle is never greater than the one who sent him. So now put into practice what I have done for you, and you will experience a life of happiness enriched with untold blessings!"

Jesus took this time to explain to the disciples that he was setting an example for them, that when he was gone, they were to wash one another's dirty feet.

They were to be humble servants.

Immediately after this conversation, Jesus predicts his betrayal (John 20:26-30 TPT)



"The one I give this piece of bread to after I've dipped it in the bowl," Jesus replied. Then he dipped the piece of bread into the bowl and handed it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And when Judas ate the piece of bread, Satan entered him. Then Jesus looked at Judas and said, "What you are planning to do, go do it now." None of those around the table realized what was happening. Some thought that Judas, their trusted treasurer, was being told to go buy what was needed for the Passover celebration, or perhaps to go give something to the poor. So Judas left quickly and went out into the dark night to betray Jesus.

I'm not going to pretend like I understand what was going on with Judas that allowed Satan to infiltrate his heart and ultimately enter him during this meal. Here are the facts I do know, though:

- Jesus knew this was his last night on earth
- Jesus loved his disciples—even Judas
- Jesus wanted to show his disciples how much he loved them—even Judas
- Jesus washed the disciples' feet—even Judas's
- Jesus broke bread with his disciples—even Judas

Every day, multiple times a day, we have a choice—to be like Jesus or to be like Judas. Our choices are different than Judas's. We aren't turning Christ over to soldiers to lead him to his eventual crucifixion. Our betrayals are just as painful, though, I'm sure. Our sins are no different.

- We gossip.
- We slander.
- We lie.
- We cheat.
- We take the easy way out.
- We judge.
- We're quiet.
- We turn a blind eye.

That list could go on and on.

We can choose to be like Judas or we can choose the humble servanthood of Christ.

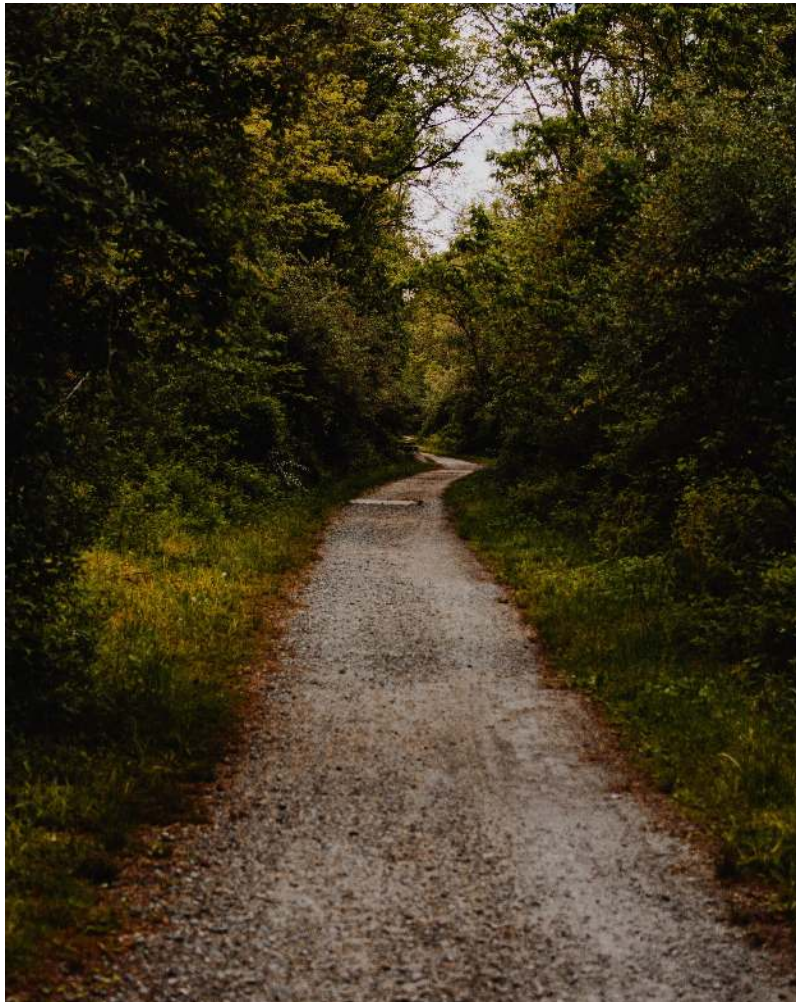
Today, as you think about this last supper and the events that transpired, I hope you take some time to reflect on your own life too. Are you heading down a path of humility and servanthood or does your life lend itself more to betraying Christ-like Judas?

Reflection Questions

1. When you think about living a life of humility and servanthood, what does that look like for you?
2. Where are your biggest struggles with living life this way?
3. Who are the people and where are the places you struggle the most with sin and betraying God?

Prayer

— God, I know that your will for me is to live a life of humility and servanthood. That's the life I want to live for you. There are times when I struggle, when I find myself acting more like Judas than Jesus. God, convict my heart in those times and help me to see my betrayal. Help me to see how I can live more like a humble servant in my everyday life.



Day 45: Choosing God isn't Always Easy (The Crucifixion)

Then he walked a short distance away, and overcome with grief, he threw himself facedown on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if there is any way you can deliver me from this suffering, please take it from me. Yet what I want is not important, for I only desire to fulfill your plan for me.”

— Matthew 26:39 (TPT)

Choosing God's will isn't always easy. In fact, there are times God calls us to walk through fires we would much rather avoid.

Jesus was no different.

I am guilty of forgetting Christ's humanity. It's easy for me to remember his divinity—he rose from the dead, after all. His humanity, though, I have a harder time wrapping my head around.

One of the most amazing examples of Christ's humanity is illustrated in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal.

Matthew 26:36-39 (TPT)

Then Jesus led his disciples to an orchard called "The Oil Press." He told them, "Sit here while I go and pray nearby." He took Peter, Jacob, and John with him. However, an intense feeling of great sorrow plunged his soul into agony. And he said to them, "My heart is overwhelmed and crushed with grief. It feels as though I'm dying. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Then he walked a short distance away, and overcome with grief, he threw himself facedown on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if there is any way you can deliver me from this suffering, please take it from me. Yet what I want is not important, for I only desire to fulfill your plan for me."

Then an angel from heaven appeared to strengthen him.

Matthew describes Jesus's emotion here, saying that "an intense feeling of great sorrow plunged his soul into agony."

It is so easy for us to look past these details because we know the end of the story. Jesus was divine, but his humanity is what we see displayed here. Jesus tells his friends, "my heart is overwhelmed and crushed with grief. It feels as though I'm dying."

It's hard for me to even wrap my head around Jesus having these very human feelings; however, I think it is so important for our understanding of Jesus and his empathy for us to be able to understand these feelings he was having. It's not just us who pray for God to take things out of our lives or to give us different paths.

Jesus prays, asking God to deliver Jesus from this destiny if there was any other way. This is a man desperate for deliverance, pleading with his Father to rescue him.

This is a man I can relate to.

It's easy to default to feeling like there's no way Jesus could understand how I'm feeling or the emotions I'm having, but the reality is that Jesus has felt the pain of desperation, the agony and the sorrow of unavoidable trauma and death.

We are not alone in our emotions and suffering.

Jesus has been there too.

At the end of his prayer, Jesus models something incredible for us, as he tells God that it is what he desires that is important, it's his will that matters, not what Jesus wants.

Those are some incredibly difficult words to pray, aren't they?

Especially when we are facing a trial and a fire we desperately want to avoid.

Choosing God's will over our own isn't always easy.

As we know, God didn't take this cup from Christ—there wasn't another way. He was arrested and the process of his crucifixion started in that very garden on this very night.

Sometimes God's will is hard, it doesn't make sense to us at the time, and we desperately wish he would choose another way.

Today, as you think about all these emotions Christ was feeling as he prepared to fulfill his Father's will, I hope you take the time to think about the hard things God has called you to do in the past or is calling you to do now. I pray that you are honest with God about your feelings and your fears, and that ultimately you trust him to lead you through whatever fire or trial is in front of you.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you faced a trial or fire you knew God was calling you to?
2. How honest are you with God when you face these types of situations?
3. How do you respond to God when he places you in these hard times? Do you do what he is asking, or do you do what you think is better for you?

Prayer

— God, it gives me peace to know that Jesus struggled with these hard emotions too, to know that he desperately wanted you to take this cup away from him if there was another way. When you lead me to trials or fires you want me to walk through, God, help me to be honest with you about my feelings. Help me to chase after your will, even when it's hard and even when I wish there were other ways. Help me to remember that your way is higher and your will is greater, even when I struggle to understand that.

Day 46: The Darkest Day

For until then they hadn't understood the Scriptures that prophesied that he was destined to rise from the dead. Puzzled, Peter and the other disciple then left and went back to their homes.

— *John 20:9-10 (TPT)*

We talk a lot about Jesus's death on a Friday and his resurrection on a Sunday, but I find myself thinking about that Saturday often.

What must that day have been like?

Can you imagine?

It had to be the darkest day.

It was the Sabbath, a day of rest, but I have to think it was a day of great mourning mixed with great anticipation. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record very little in their narratives of what happened on this unforgettable Sabbath Day.

They all agree on several facts:

- Joseph of Arimathea got permission to retrieve and entomb Jesus's body.
- Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James were all present and were at the tomb.
- There was a giant rock placed in front of the tomb.

That's the extent of what we know from all four authors of this day.

My imagination runs wild with scenarios like this. I can't help but think about how all those people who loved Jesus were handling this darkest day.

What must it have been like for Mary to watch her son be beaten, abused, and crucified? As a mother, there's nothing you could say to convince me that the fact she knew this day was coming would have made it any easier for her to watch. Then, for her to sit and watch as Joseph cared for Jesus's body, wrapped him in burial clothes, and placed him in the tomb. What was she thinking? I think the idealist in us wants to think she knew he would live again, but the realist in me wonders how much doubt she was feeling, that she was struggling with the idea that she would never see her son again, hug her son again, hear his voice again. How heartbreaking must that day have been for her?

Then I think about Peter—Peter who loved Jesus, who had just watched one of his best friends being brutally crucified. Peter, who had denied his best friend three times before the sun came up on that Saturday morning. Peter, who believed his friend was dead. John explains (20:9-10 TPT) that:

For until then they hadn't understood the Scriptures that prophesied that he was destined to rise from the dead. Puzzled, Peter and the other disciple then left and went back to their homes.

It wasn't until the next day that Peter would begin to understand that Jesus was fulfilling this prophecy and literally rising from the dead. That means that Peter spent Saturday believing this was the end for Jesus.

What must that have been like for him after denying Christ three times?

What must it have been like for all the disciples?

- They watched as Judas betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide before Jesus was even crucified.
- They watched as Jesus was beaten.
- They watched as Jesus carried his own cross.
- They watched as Jesus was mocked by the Jewish officials.
- They watched as the crown of thorns was smashed onto Jesus's head.
- They watched as the spear pierced Jesus's side.
- They watched as Jesus took his last breaths.
- They watched as Mary witnessed the murder of her son.

I can't imagine the sorrow and the mourning that must have engulfed this darkest day for them.

In all my years in the church, I've never heard anyone talk about this day.

The irony for me in this is that we all have had dark days in our lives. We've all had days where we didn't see how the sun could possibly rise tomorrow. We've endured loss. We've mourned. We've felt the hopelessness these loved ones of Jesus must have been feeling after the tragedy they had witnessed.

Thankfully, even on our darkest days, we always have hope.

While the disciples had to live through their Saturday hopelessness, we know that Sunday is coming. We know Jesus fulfilled God's will and the prophecies and did in fact live again.

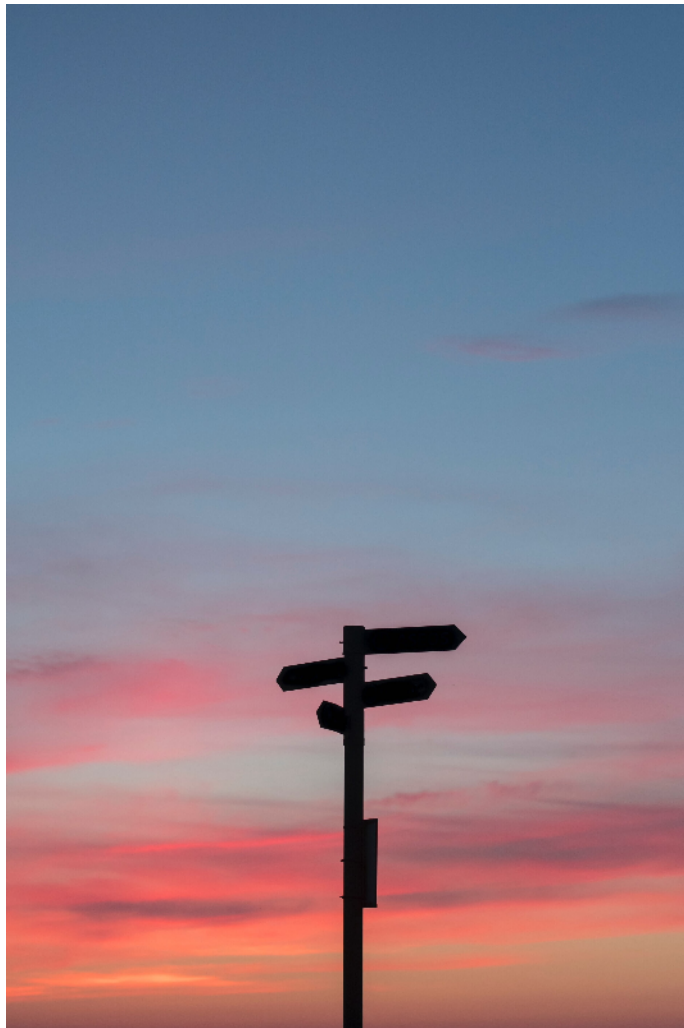
Friend, you will undoubtedly face some dark days, days that probably feel to you like this Saturday felt to these disciples. I pray that when you face these dark days, you will remember that Sunday is coming, that you can rest in the love, grace, mercy, and sacrifice of Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you felt this same darkness or hopelessness the disciples must have felt on this dark Saturday?
2. How did you make it through that dark time?
3. When you encounter other people who are sitting in these dark days, how can you support them?

Prayer

— God, it's hard to imagine what this darkest day must have been like for the early Christians and those closest to Christ. I can't imagine the feelings of grief and devastation they must have been experiencing. God, I know I've had my fair share of dark days, but I'm grateful for the hope you provide that never falters. As I reflect on this time, help me remember Christ's death and what it meant for all those around him.



Day 47: Chase God's Goodness (Christ's Resurrection)

Then Mary Magdalene left to inform the disciples of her encounter with Jesus. "I have seen the Lord!" she told them. And she gave them his message.

— John 20:18 (TPT)

John 20:1-18 (TPT)

1 Very early Sunday morning, before sunrise, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. And when she arrived she discovered that the stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb was moved away! 2 So she went running as fast as she could to go tell Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved. She told them, "They've taken the Lord's body from the tomb, and we don't know where he is!"

3 Then Peter and the other disciple jumped up and ran to the tomb to go see for themselves. 4 They started out together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He didn't enter the tomb, but peeked in, and saw only the linen cloths lying there. 6 Then Peter came behind him and went right into the tomb. He too noticed the linen cloths lying there, 7 but the burial cloth that had been on Jesus' head had been rolled up and placed separate from the other cloths.

11 Mary arrived back at the tomb, broken and sobbing. She stooped to peer inside, and through her tears 12 she saw two angels in dazzling white robes, sitting where Jesus' body had been laid—one at the head and one at the feet!

8 Then the other disciple who had reached the tomb first went in, and after one look, he believed! 9 For until then they hadn't understood the Scriptures that prophesied that he was destined to rise from the dead. 10 Puzzled, Peter and the other disciple then left and went back to their homes.

13 "Dear woman, why are you crying?" they asked.

Mary answered, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him."

14 Then she turned around to leave, and there was Jesus standing in front of her, but she didn't realize that it was him!

15 He said to her, "Dear woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Mary answered, thinking he was only the gardener, "Sir, if you have taken his body somewhere else, tell me, and I will go and . . ."

16 "Mary," Jesus interrupted her.

Turning to face him, she said, "Rabboni!" (Aramaic for "My teacher!")

17 Jesus cautioned her, "Mary, don't cling to me, for I haven't yet ascended to God, my Father. And he's not only my Father and God, but now he's your Father and your God! Now go to my brothers and tell them what I've told you, that I am ascending to my Father—and your Father, to my God—and your God!"

18 Then Mary Magdalene left to inform the disciples of her encounter with Jesus. "I have seen the Lord!" she told them. And she gave them his message.

All four gospels tell this narrative a little differently, but they all share the fact that Mary went to the tomb and found it empty. They all share the fact that Mary was the first person Jesus spoke to after his resurrection, and they all share Mary's uncontrollable excitement at seeing Jesus alive.

It's tough for me to even put myself in Mary's shoes here—to think about what it must have been like to be in the depths of mourning, to go to the grave thinking she would be delivering burial spices and spending her day mourning a man she dearly loved, to find him gone, and to return only to have him appear before her alive and well.

The emotions must have been overwhelming.

Her thoughts had to be racing uncontrollably.

Her heart must have been ready to explode.

See, Mary Magdalene's life had been changed by Jesus. When Mark describes Mary Magdalene, he refers to her as a woman from whom Jesus had driven out seven demons (16:9). She understood the power Jesus had to change lives because he had changed her life, he had given her life.

Today is the last day of our study, and my prayer for you is that you share Mary's excitement over the resurrected Jesus, that you have felt firsthand how Jesus changes lives—and how he has changed your life.

We are blessed with unequivocal grace, mercy, and forgiveness because of Christ's sacrifice on Friday and resurrection today.

It's my prayer that over the last 40 days, you have refreshed your faith and been drawn into an intimacy with God you never dreamed possible.

It's my prayer that you react with the same uncontrollable love and appreciation when you encounter Jesus every day that Mary Magdalene responded with on this day.

Reflection Questions

1. How has your faith and relationship with God changed over the last 40 days?
2. What is one thing you still want to work on?
3. Take a few minutes to express your gratitude and emotion to God for the sacrifice of Jesus.

Prayer

— God, I want to have the same excitement and emotion as Mary Magdalene when I encounter you on a daily basis. Help me to remember that you saved me, that you sent Jesus to die that horrible death so that I don't have to. Help me to live forgiven and in faith as I walk with you every day. I love you. Help my life to show that.



What does it mean to refresh your faith?

Every year when the Lenten season comes around, I hear about Christians choosing to give up something as a testament to the sacrifice of Christ. Several years ago, I made a choice to give up time—to spend more time in communion with God, to reflect on my relationship, and to pursue intimacy with my Creator.

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Kristen is a recovering fundamentalist who believes that truth, faith, and the sovereignty of God will survive deconstruction and are absolutely critical components of healthy reconstruction. She loves literary analysis and reading scripture with an analyst's eye. She lives in rural Ohio with her husband--Russ, daughter--Kate, faithful dog--Lucy, and her grandma's cat--Butters (that's a story for another day). When her parents aren't snowbirds, they join the party in their mother-in-law suite, affectionately referred to as Cabin B.