



What makes you
HAPPY?



Daily Devotional

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WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY Devotionals

Welcome to our What Makes You Happy Devotional series. Each week, you will find five daily entries that tie in with Chris's message from the previous Sunday. There will be a short reading that involves a related scripture, a place to respond either by reflecting in your mind, writing the answers to the given questions, or even drawing a picture related to the entry. Finally, we will end with a prayer.

Prayer is nothing more than talking to God. You might open with "Dear Lord," "Loving God," "Heavenly Father," or something else that feels comfortable for you. Read through each prayer one sentence at a time. Take it slowly and envision the way each part applies to your life. If you can, allow yourself a few minutes afterward to stop and listen for what God wants to say to you. This can be one of the hardest parts of prayer, since God rarely speaks to us in an audible way. But if you spend a moment or two in silence, you might feel Him prompt something in your spirit or give you some direction, a way to apply what you've just read.

Take a breath, read with an open heart and mind, and enjoy.



Week One

Day 1

Several years ago, I found myself working in a job where I was underpaid, overworked, and underappreciated. To add to my unhappiness, I was driving an hour each way to work five days a week. I was down, and I knew something had to change. Then, I received what a friend of mine refers to as a “God wink.” I heard radio ads about turning your degree into a teaching license. I had already begun coursework in Elementary Education, and God revealed the path to finally becoming a teacher and fulfilling His will for my life in that moment. So I put in my notice, went back to school to earn my license, and now I’m at the start of my seventh year as a fifth grade teacher.

In Jesus’ famous message, the Sermon on the Mount, he began with a series of blessings (**Matthew 5:3-12**). The first of them speaks to those of us in situations like I found myself in back then:

God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs (Matthew 5:3, New Living Translation).

Other translations use the phrase “*poor in spirit*.” The idea is that when you are beaten down spiritually, at the end of your rope, and you feel like you’ve run out of faith, God is still on your side. When we are down to our last thread of hope, our last dollar in the bank, our last prayer, God is still fighting for us.

Have you ever been there? Was there a time when you were down on your luck? When you felt like the world was against you? A moment when all you needed was God to reach down and put you back on your feet? In those moments, God prepares great blessings. They might come to us in subtle ways, like when the bills all seem to get paid, even when money is tight. You could get an unexpected phone call from an old friend who wants to catch up with you. Or someone might reach out with a gift of food, clothing, or money because God placed you on his/her heart.

Even when you are poor in spirit, don’t despair. God is preparing a blessing for you, whether big or small, if you are open to what His will for you.

Take a moment to reflect on today’s devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Think back to a time when you were “*poor in spirit*.” How did that situation get resolved? What kind of connections can you make between the problem and its solution that you may have missed at the time? What kind of blessing did God bring you? If you are currently in the midst of a “*poor in spirit*” situation, keep your head up, your heart open, and your eyes peeled for God’s work in your circumstance.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, thank you for your many blessings, both large and small. Help me to have eyes that can see your hand in my life, so that I might feel your presence and catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Give me an open heart to hear your promptings so that I might be a blessing for someone else in their time of need.

Day 2

My Grandma Betty is the reason I'm a Christ follower today. When I was a kid, she would take me and my sister to church when our parents went out late on an occasional Saturday night. She invited us to Easter every spring. It wasn't until the end of middle school that I started attending church on my own volition, and I didn't truly connect to God until the end of high school. But Grandma Betty planted the seeds that lead to my faith today as a husband and a father.

When she passed away, I was devastated. She was the matriarch of my family, and I knew that no holiday celebrations or family birthday parties would be the same without her. At her viewing and funeral, we cried many tears, but we also smiled and laughed and remembered the woman she was: a mother, a sister, an aunt, a grandmother, and a friend. Yes, we were sad. A vital piece of our family was gone. But we also got to reflect on our time with Betty. Stories of no mercy Phase 10 games, her wearing two different plaid patterns because "plaid and plaid match," the moments we got one-on-one time with her. Each of us, from my mom and her sisters to me and my cousins to extended family, mourned. We experienced the depths of grief and sadness, but we found comfort in one another, joy through reflection, and peace from God. The final blessing for me was learning that my wife was pregnant at the funeral and didn't know it. We like to think that our daughter got to meet her Great-Grandma Betty in Heaven as their paths crossed.

Jesus said, "God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted (Matthew 5:4 New Living Translation)."

That comfort can come from close family and friends. It can come from positive memories of the one(s) you've lost. It can come directly from God.

We've all been there, whether a friend or loved one has passed away or we've lost a close bond when someone moved far away or a relationship dissolved. In those times of grief and sorrow, remember that God is ready and willing to comfort you, whether through a gentle hand or kind word from someone or a sense of peace flooding your spirit.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. If you are willing, recall a period in your life where you were in mourning. Who was there to comfort you? Were there any moments when you felt the weight of your grief lift, even for a moment? How did God bring you peace despite your sorrow? If you are in mourning now, how has He offered you comfort? Are you open to what He can do for you?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, thank you for the people you've placed in my life, both the ones who have helped shape who I am today and those who have helped me through tough times. Your comfort in my mourning has been a great relief. Open my eyes to the ways in which I can offer comfort to those around me who are in a season of mourning themselves.

Day 3

I'm a helper. I love to reach out and lend a hand. If my wife, a friend, or a coworker needs some assistance, I'm there. Sometimes I do things without being asked because I know the other person will appreciate it. It's nice to hear a "Thank you," but it's usually little to no extra effort on my part to make things easier for someone else. For example, if I'm coming through the front office at school, I pass by the faculty mailboxes. If I see a package addressed to a friend, and I'm going to pass their room anyway, I'll likely take it down with me to save him/her a trip. Maybe it's a highly anticipated resource for the classroom. The sooner it gets where it's supposed to go, the better. With that in mind, when things get difficult or I'm faced with a task I've never done before, I'll ask for advice or help. Sometimes all it takes to get the job done is a second set of hands. Or a YouTube tutorial explaining how to replace a headlight bulb in my car or the battery in my key fob. There's a lot I don't know, but I can learn if someone is willing to pass along those missing skills. It takes some humility to admit that, but I'm surrounded by an incredibly generous circle of friends who are willing to help me when I'm humble enough to ask.

Now that you know that about me, there's another side to the coin. I'm also incredibly stubborn and prideful. If I fix my mind on completing a project myself, I'm likely to avoid asking for help because I can absolutely do that thing on my own. It can be something as complex as building a shelving unit for my garage, a job which would have been made 1,000 times easier with someone to hold the corner supports while I screwed each shelf in place. Or it could be as simple as carrying a bookshelf to a coworker's classroom by myself. Three steps in, I knew I would be better off if I had some help. But it was just an empty bookshelf, and I said I'd get it myself. A passing custodian asked if I needed a two-wheeled dolly. Did I take that suggestion? Of course not! It would be quicker to suffer through the short journey down the hall, potentially pulling a muscle in my back, than to admit defeat, put the shelf down, and get the dolly.

Jesus said, "God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth (Matthew 5:4 New Living Translation)."

Humility doesn't always come easily. But God doesn't want us to overextend ourselves or to go through life alone just to save face or keep up appearances. Remember that Jesus called us to be humble. Admit when you need help, and give someone the chance to show you love and kindness.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Do you struggle with humility? Do you battle stubbornness in the face of looking foolish or weak? Think back to a time when you ignored a chance to be humble. How would you and anyone else involved have been blessed by your humility? What is one area in your life where you feel God calling you to be humble?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, show me how to be humble. Remind me that no one can make it through life alone. Sometimes I need my brothers and sisters to lend a hand, and other times I need to call on you for help. Dissolve my stubborn and prideful heart, and let me admit when I'm not strong enough, wise enough, or patient enough on my own. Thank you for the help you bring me in those times of need.

Day 4

Everyone has a grumpy coworker. That person who always seems to look at the negative side of things or can't see the silver linings in their cloudy sky. Maybe it's someone who has seen more than their fair share of heartache or challenges, and those experiences have left them hardened. Or they view life through a cynical lens. Or maybe they just find joy in picking at others. These people tend to have a reputation. Either you hear stories about them when you start at a new job or you learn early on through firsthand experience.

While others keep their distance from them, I dive right in. It seems silly to me to walk on eggshells around someone when you have to work directly with them to get your job done. If I have time, I stop and make conversation. I commiserate with them about our shared frustrations, be it a schedule change that throws the entire staff off its groove for an entire day or waiting for building construction to wrap up and return us to a sense of normalcy. I share a smile or a joke or even wave and say "Hello," as I pass in the hall. Building those connections has come to my benefit. I can go to those people with odd or inconvenient requests and know that I might get a "yes" when others would get a "no." In Paul's letter to the Romans, he told them,

*"Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone
(Romans 12:18, New Living Translation)."*

By living at peace with my coworkers, I can shine a light into my workplace. I can make a small difference in their lives and in mine.

*Jesus said, "God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God
(Matthew 5:9 New Living Translation)."*

He doesn't expect us to get along with everyone or to live without conflict. But think of the good that can come from reaching out to others in your life to bring them peace. Maybe you could do with a little peace yourself. Sometimes blessing others blesses us right along with them.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Where can you sow seeds of peace in your life? Your workplace? Your neighborhood? Your house? Take a mental walk through your day or your week. When are you or others angry, discontent, or worried? What would it mean to you and the people in your life if you did all you could to live at peace with everyone?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, help me to be a peacemaker today. Reveal a person or a situation I can speak peace into this week. Speak into my heart and help me find peace to combat any frustration and worry inside me. Bring me peace so that I can spread it to others. Thank you for the peacemakers you have placed in my life. Remind me to turn to them when I find my own sense of peace running low.

Day 5

There are a lot of LEGO bricks in my living room. I loved building with LEGO as a kid, and I've passed that love onto my daughter. One of the first rules we taught Zoey, and I'm sure my mother taught me, when building with LEGOs is not to play with them on the couch. This keeps you from losing tiny plastic pieces between the couch cushions and risking someone sitting on a sharp corner. It also ensures you build on a firm foundation. Imagine my bright-eyed seven-year-old constructing a castle for one of her princess minifigures or a pink and green striped cat on our comfy couch. She gets down to grab more bricks, but climbing back up disrupts the build. The castle teeters. The cat tumbles. Plastic crashes to the floor and shatters, sending pieces in a dozen different directions. Picture the heartbreak that would ensue. Sometimes my daughter can shrug off a setback like that and move on. Other times, it's the end of the world. My wife or I have to calm her down and help her see that she can rebuild what's broken or start over with a new idea. All because she didn't build on a solid base.

It's similar for us. Say you make a new friend or begin dating someone new. Maybe you tell a little white lie about where you work or where you grew up. Something to save yourself from an uncomfortable or unpleasant conversation. But as that relationship progresses, it takes more lies to maintain the first one. Once the truth is revealed, you're likely left with broken trust, loads of questions, and the potential end of that relationship. If you build a new relationship on a shaky foundation, it's bound to fail. Instead, picture that same new relationship on steady ground. You admit your flaws, don't skirt around the uncomfortable bits of yourself and your past when they come up, and speak honestly. It's not guaranteed that things will end happily. But you know that there are no surprises to come along and blindside you. No shaky foundation to risk making things tumble to the ground. At least from your end of the relationship.

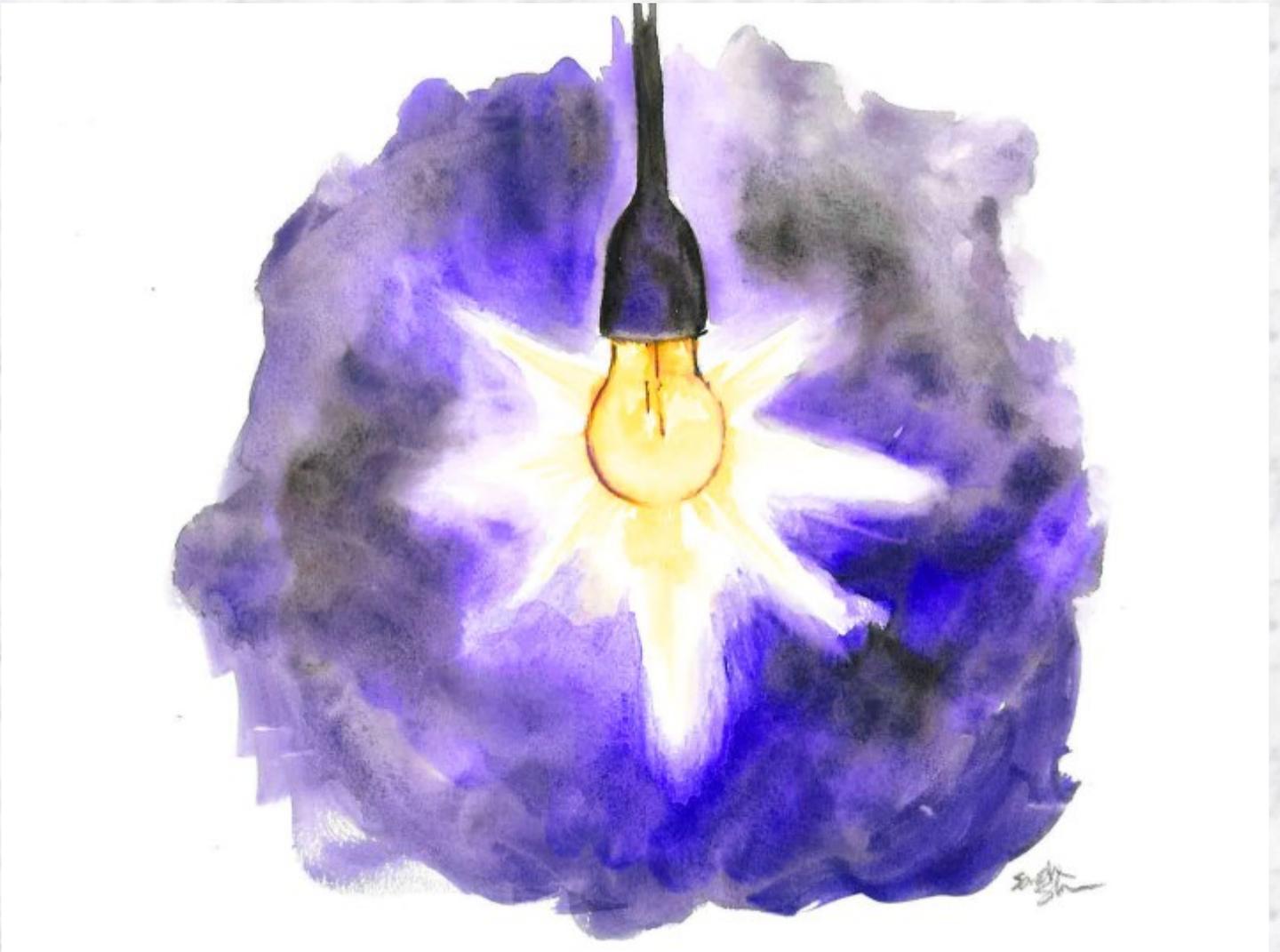
In the Sermon on the Mount (from way back on Day 1), Jesus said,

"Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. ²⁵Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. ²⁶But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. ²⁷When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash."

Just like a house without a firm foundation will shift and sink, or a LEGO creation with tip and break on a comfy couch, so will go our lives without a solid rock to stand upon. We need Jesus and his teachings to build upon.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Are you building your life on a firm foundation? Is Jesus the solid rock under your feet? Where do you need to strengthen the supports in your life? What relationships could use the sureness that Christ offers?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, show me the sandy places in the foundation of my life. Give me eyes to see where I need to strengthen relationships and fill them with you. Above all else, help me turn to you for guidance. Lead me to the people who can help build me up and will draw me closer to you.



Week Two

Day 6

I remember meeting my wife and becoming friends with her. I don't think I realized that I loved her as soon as I actually did, because it came on so gradually. We were attending Ball State at the time, had a few mutual friends, and lived in neighboring residence halls. When we met through the campus, student-run swing dancing club, she and I connected instantly. We liked similar nerdy shows and movies, wore the same style shoes (low-top Converse in a variety of colors), and generally enjoyed the other's company. Soon we were walking to classes together, eating together in the dining halls, and sharing our favorite shows with each other. I wanted to spend all my time with her and, I think it's safe to say, she felt the same way about me.

That abiding love had become a part of me. I didn't have to think about it or try and achieve it. It was just there. That is the kind of love God wants us to have for Him. A Pharisee, an expert in religious law, asked Jesus what the most important commandment was in the Old Testament (the first half of the Bible).

Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38, New Living Translation)."

The kind of love you have for that special someone, the kind that makes you want to spend all your time with him or her, to get lost in conversation, and just to be in the other person's presence. That's what God wants us to find in Him. He wants us to pour all of ourselves into our relationship with Him. He's the one who knows us best and loves us most, so why shouldn't we? God is ready to spend time with you, to walk beside you and guide you through the ups and downs of life, whenever you are ready and willing to join Him.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Have you ever experienced that sort of love? The kind that washes over you and makes you want to spend every waking moment with another person? Have you ever felt that pull toward God? How can you take a step toward Him today? Consider spending a few minutes each day this week with Him. Find a place where you can sit quietly and listen for Him. You may not hear anything audible, but if you focus on God, he may stir in your heart or send a whisper to your spirit. Be open to a deeper connection with Him today.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, thank you for building each of us with a heart that is designed to seek out love. Remind me today to seek time with you just as I seek time with my close friends and family. Open my ears that I might hear your whispers. Clear away the distractions of this world that would keep me from connecting with you today. I ask that you reach down and touch my heart today. Help me to feel you near me and to look for you when I don't. Fill me with your love, so that I might love you with all my heart, soul, and mind.

Day 7

Think back to a day when you were feeling down or you weren't in the moment because your thoughts were on a stressful situation gnawing at the back of your mind. Maybe you cut someone off in traffic. No turn signal. No blind spot check. Just another driver paying enough attention to avoid a collision. They honk at you, and you wave to apologize, but you forget the entire encounter in seconds. Or you're at the store. The line behind you is long, your kid is screaming in the cart, and you're flipping through your wallet or digging in your purse to find that twenty dollar bill you know you put in there the other day. Where is it? The cashier taps her fingers on the countertop. You look back and see the full belt waiting to get rung up as soon as you find that money. You could be standing at the yogurt case, trying to find your favorite brand and a flavor you like. But they moved it to a different spot since last week, or you just can't decide whether you want Peach or Key Lime Pie. Once you choose, you realize that someone is standing close by, waiting to get some yogurt of their own from the same door you were using. Or worse: from behind the door your cart has been blocking while you decided.

We've all done something like this. You've made a simple mistake, been off your game, held someone up. Do you get angry or upset about it? Of course not! You smile, chuckle, say, "Sorry," or "Excuse me," and move on. But what happens the moment one of those things happens to you? If you're like me, you grumble at the person holding up the checkout line. You roll our eyes at the person who's in the way of the next thing on your grocery list. If you're in traffic, you give your fellow driver some loud tips for how to safely operate their vehicle.

It helps to flip your perspective. When you find yourself falling prey to anger, remember what it feels like to be in the other person's position. Would you want met with that same anger? Or would you rather be treated with love? Jesus told his followers that the greatest commandment from the Old Testament (the first half of the Bible) was to love God. But the second one, which he deemed equally important, was to

"Love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39, New Living Translation)."

Anyone can be your neighbor, not just the people who live next door or down the street. Look on the people you meet this week with love. Extend them grace and forgiveness. You have no idea what they're going through. Sure, that person may just be selfish or absent-minded or rude. Or they could be in the middle of a struggle. If you were in their place, what might be going through your mind? Probably not, "I wonder if I'm holding someone else up." Give them the same mercy you would want to receive from someone if the shoe was on the other foot.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Remember that you have been "that person" to someone else. You have been an inconvenience or a hold up when your neighbor was in a hurry or at their wit's end. Rather than getting down about it, use it as motivation to reach out to others with the love of Jesus. What simple act of mercy can you show to someone who truly needs it? Keep your eyes open for a way to love your neighbor this week.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, you give me mercy and forgiveness even when I don't deserve it. Thank you for that gift. Open my heart to someone who needs that same gift. Give me the words to speak or the prompting to act in a way that would shine a light toward you, so that someone else might come closer to you.

Day 8

Were you ever afraid of the dark? As children, it's easy to fear the darkness. It represents the unknown. I remember coming to the realization that I wasn't afraid of the dark itself, but whatever could be lurking there. Maybe there was a monster just out of sight. Or an ax murderer or a killer clown from outer space. We can blame movies and television for those images in my twelve-year-old mind. Having a flashlight in hand while you were outside at night made all the difference. If there was a mysterious noise or an especially terrifying shadow, you could shine a light into the darkness and immediately know that there was nothing to fear.

My daughter sleeps with a night light. When it stopped working, my wife and I thought that we could just cut her off cold turkey. Zoey's seven years old. She could surely sleep through the night without it. But that idea was quickly disproven. She had a hard time getting to sleep, worried about the shadows on her walls, and she woke up in the night, scared of the dark. Needless to say, we found a replacement when it became apparent that things weren't getting better.

As followers of Christ, we are called to be light to a world covered with darkness. John, one of Jesus's closest friends during his ministry, said,

"So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:6-7, New Living Translation)."

God is a light, and that light shines from within us to chase away the shadows of doubt and despair in our broken world. Yes, we stumble or wander from His path or fall face first into the dirt. Or we forget that we have God's light inside. But when we pick ourselves up and get back to where we belong, His light guides us. We can't see the whole way to the place God is leading us, but He reveals the next steps and helps us to see that it's safe. Just like a night light can bring us comfort at bedtime or a flashlight can chase away our irrational fears of the shadows, God's light fills us with peace. And it reminds us that we aren't in this alone. God is here to guide us, but we have our brothers and sisters in Christ to walk along beside us throughout our journey in this world. Never forget that.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. What fears have kept you from moving forward along the path God has set for you? Is something holding you back today? Who can you turn to for support? Is there a specific person that comes to mind? If you are hesitating to take the next steps, reach out to him/her today. And remember to turn to God for guidance. Let him know about your doubts and fears, so that you can surrender them to Him.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, shine your light through me today. Help me to better see the path you've laid for me. Life can be overwhelming, and I don't always know what's coming next. Please relieve me of my worries today. Replace them with your peace and the knowledge that you have good things planned for me. Help me to turn to my church family in times of need, but remind me to reach out when others need a hand. Remind me that we are in this together.

Day 9

My sister Whitney and I are good friends. We can have a two-hour phone conversation and spend most of it making each other laugh. But we weren't always so close. We were never truly at each other's throats, but when you're ten years old and just want a little alone time, it's easy to push your five year old sister out of your bedroom, close the door behind her, and sit with your back against it so she can't barge in. There was the time that I threw her favorite stuffed animal at her and laughed when I hit her in the eye. Or when I used my red, handheld Dymo label maker to make a sticker that said, "I SUCK," and put it on her forehead to show our dad. Not my proudest moment. But as my angry dad raised his hand to smash that label maker, my little sister defended me. She tried to convince him that it was just a joke and she knew I didn't mean it. Her plea didn't save my gadget, but it spoke volumes.

I remember my mom saying something profound about family, which has stuck with me to this day: You don't have to like each other, but you have to love each other. She probably told me that in response to how I felt about my annoying little sister. In those moments, Whitney had every right to follow mom's advice about me. I wasn't all that nice to her at the time. But she never stopped liking me after all I put her through. Thankfully, I let up as I got older and our friendship had a chance to grow into something pretty great.

The apostle John tells us,

"If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their Christian brothers and sisters (1 John 4:20-21, New Living Translation)."

God is love. When we get truly connected to Him, we are filled with that love and get to share it with the world. But that is sometimes easier said than done. People aren't always easy to love. It could be a cruel sibling, an arrogant neighbor, or a rude coworker. It could even be someone who sits across the aisle from you at church. But God calls us to love everyone, regardless of how we feel about them, especially our fellow Christ followers. Remember my mom's advice. You don't have to like each other, but you have to love each other. For better or worse, it's our mission.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Who in your life is difficult to love? Is there someone in your family, neighborhood, friend group, or workplace who tries your patience? What small adjustments can you make so that you show God's love to those people who truly need it? Maybe you're the thorn in someone else's side. What can you change to be more lovable toward the people in your life?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, soften my heart. Reveal the person or people I need to reach out to in love today. Stir in my heart so that I can make a difference in their lives. Use me to spread love and understanding in my sphere of influence. If I am a sticking point for others, guide me to the change that will make the greatest impact on myself and those around me. Thank you for showing me love even when I'm not lovable.

Day 10

Have you ever been blessed when you didn't deserve it? You snapped at your kids and made them cry. But later, they came up and apologized, unprompted, and hugged you. Or you were at your wit's end and needed a coffee from Starbucks and the person ahead of you paid for your order. Or a close friend continually pours his/her heart out through long lunches, willingness to watch your children with no expectation to reciprocate or to need for payment, and generally offering encouraging words and affirmations.

That last one is what true Christian community looks and feels like. Sometimes you're on the giving end, sharing from your excess, even if its meager. Other times, you're on the receiving end. Life ebbs and flows. We go through seasons of trials and seasons of blessings. But my family has benefited from getting connected to a small group. We don't live close to family (we're more than an hour away from either of our parents), but our small group members have become like a surrogate family in their place. We are incredibly blessed to have such caring, tenderhearted, compassionate people in our lives. They share in our struggles and celebrate with us when things are going well. We can confide in them, come to them when we're in need of prayer, or just sit down and catch up with them when we haven't seen each other for a while. We are part of a great support system that has helped families through loss and grief, new babies, job transitions, parenting struggles, and so many other things. We are privileged to have one another.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says,

"Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory (Romans 5:1-2, New Living Translation)."

God's blessings come to us in many ways. We won't always find ourselves at peace or in times of easy living, but He brings us encouragement, strength, and support through our fellow brothers and sisters. They are our undeserved privilege, at least in my experience. If you haven't connected with a small group, what's holding you back? God wants to bless you and bless others through you, and joining a small group is a great way to do that.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Look back on the past week. How has God blessed you in undeserved ways? What little moments have brought you comfort or peace right when you needed it? Reflect on how something so small made such a big difference for you. If you're part of a small group, how have your fellow members brought you to a place of undeserved privilege? If you're not part of a small group, what's standing in your way? Ask God to lead you to the group that's right for you.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us one another. Help us to remember the strength that comes when we share each other's burdens and lighten heavy loads for our brothers and sisters. Remind us to reach out when we're able so that we can show your love to people near to you and far from you. Lead us down a path that would draw others into our community of love. Convict us when we hold too tightly to your blessings. Help us to see how we can share them with others.



Week Three

Day 11

Have you ever bought a lottery ticket? Maybe you get some scratch-offs at the gas station now and then. Or you buy a PowerBall ticket when the jackpot gets high. There's a pool at work for just such an occasion. When the projected winnings get substantial, one person puts out the big yellow envelope. "Write your name and the amount you paid on the outside, and anything we win will be split accordingly." People talk about how nice it would be to win, even if you only got a small fraction of the prize money. A few joke that they'd take a long vacation, or they'd retire early. But on the flip side of things, we've all heard stories of people who win millions of dollars in the lottery and end up back where they started six months later. Sometimes they're in more debt than before.

King Solomon is considered the wisest man in the Bible. He was a great ruler and wrote a book of wise sayings known as Proverbs. Many verses compare two paths: the way of the fool and the way of the wise. In one verse, he writes,

"Wealth from get-rich-quick schemes quickly disappears; wealth from hard work grows over time (Proverbs 13:11, New Living Translation)."

When you're given money, whether it's a gift or a prize, it's easy to think, "Well, I can do anything I want with this. It's extra." But if you work hard to earn it, you're more likely to use it wisely. You know the time and effort it took to earn it. If you spend it carelessly, it will take many more hours of labor and toil to earn the same amount. Some of us have steady jobs. We know that there's a check coming every week or two. We get it in hand or deposited right into our bank account. Others of us don't have that luxury. Maybe you work on commission, doing a job for days or weeks at a time and asking around for another lead when that project is done. Maybe you've been laid off or fired and are looking for work. You're ready and willing to put forth the effort necessary to earn some money to make ends meet.

That's the trouble with get-rich-quick schemes, whether that money comes from the lottery, a multi-level marketing campaign, or gambling. Because there's not hard work to back it up, you're not invested. God knows the importance of hard work, and he wants the same for you. If you have everything given to you, it doesn't mean as much. But if you can point out the time and energy you pour into a paycheck, you'll be much more careful with that money. So work hard, and be wise with the portion God has brought to you.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Are you working hard for the money you make? If so, are you following God's path and using your money wisely? Are you looking for work? Or struggling to make ends meet? Offer your frustrations to God. He wants to bless you, even in small ways. What can you do to show Him that you will be a good steward of His gifts?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, thank you for your blessings. For the jobs we have, the ones in the works, and the ones you have waiting just around the corner for us. Fill us with your spirit so that we will continue to work hard for the money we earn. Remind us that everything good comes from you, and show us how to use those good things in the best way possible. For our benefit and the benefit of others.

Day 12

I grew up in a two-parent household. I lived with my mother, father, and little sister. On the outside, my family looked whole. But my father, though present, was still absent. He wasn't one of those workaholic business-types, pushing papers in an office well past his 40 hours. But he definitely worked. To this day, he's a blue collar worker, doing maintenance on large production equipment in a factory. When I was a kid, he spent many years working third-shift. We'd say goodbye to him around 8 or 8:30, and he'd be back before we left for school. But when we got home or during school breaks, we had to walk on eggshells during the day. Dad was sleeping, and it wouldn't be good to wake him.

My father grew up with a strong work ethic and instilled that in me and my sister. But that work ethic drove him to become little more than a financial provider for our family. We weren't rich by any means, but we never went without. If we needed new clothes or outgrew a pair of shoes, Mom would take us out to get some. We got toys and games from our wish lists, but not enough to spoil us. Mom did a lot of home cooking, but we still got takeout now and then. But in place of all that financial security, my father sacrificed the chance to show us his love in a tangible way. He was always sure to say, "Love ya," before he went out the door, but I never got a hug from him. Or a "good job" for good grades. He showed up to end-of-the-year school awards and my middle and high school graduations, but Dad never came to any of my plays or choir performances. His father never showed him that kind of love and support, and he never developed it on his own. I love my dad, but I wonder how different things would be now if he had invested more in me as a person instead of just focusing on my financial needs.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he addresses Christ-followers who may have been coming from the Jewish tradition of keeping the Law of Moses. He tells them, and us,

"Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law (Romans 13:8, New Living Translation)."

Money is temporary. Love is eternal. If you spend all your time at work, building a small fortune, or seclude yourself from family in the name of financial peace, but neglect your family in the process, what have you gained? Isn't it better to have a happy marriage/family/circle of friends than to have a loaded bank account? Love your neighbor (including your family) first, and God will help you handle the rest.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. What kind of power does money hold in your life? Is work keeping you away from those you love? Are you more focused on paying off debt than connecting with your spouse? Have you sacrificed time with your children for time on the job? How can you loosen your grip on money and free space in your heart to show love to others.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, you are so generous to me. I am blessed in so many ways. Help me to see the ways in which you pour out goodness and mercy into my life. Soften my heart so that I might be better equipped to love my family and friends. Remind me that you will always provide for my needs and never leave me, even if I fall on hard times. Let me be more open to love and less dependent on the work that can keep me from my loved ones.

Day 13

After I graduated college, I started working a full-time job. It had nothing to do with my major (first Elementary Education, then Creative Writing), but it helped pay the bills. I was doing new things I hadn't done before. Suddenly, I was in charge of other people. I had to place orders to refill inventory, make schedules, hire new employees. It was hard work, but I had my first official grown-up job. Around that time, a close friend was in a similar situation. He'd graduated the same time as me and was also working full-time. He got married around that time, too. But soon I noticed that he and his new wife had a new house and a couple of new cars. Sure, I didn't have the highest paying job, but there was a growing difference between what I had and what my friend had. I compared my life and my finances to his, and a little voice in the back of my mind began to ask, "What am I doing wrong? How have I already gotten so behind in life, when I've only just started?"

Those thoughts still pop up and eat away at my confidence in myself and what God has blessed me with. It's easy to think that if you just made a little more money then everything would be okay. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we're told,

"Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness (Ecclesiastes 5:10, New Living Translation)!"

Money has the potential to solve some of life's problems. But it's likely to bring along more with it. Once you get more money, it's easy to fall into the trap of greed. "I have some. Now I just need a little more." What starts out as a small problem quickly becomes a big one.

After a couple years of comparing with that friend, I learned that the big house and new cars came with a lot of credit card debt. It wasn't long before the payments became too much and the cars were replaced with older ones that cost much less. The same with the house. I was only seeing the surface level of things, and it made me jealous. It sparked a need for more wealth and more possessions to keep up with other people. I lost sight of what God had already given me. That's an area where I still struggle. It's easy to get swept up in society's expectations to have more stuff, even if it means amassing debt to achieve it. Don't forget that wealth is temporary. And it doesn't bring peace of mind or stability. Those things come from God.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Have you placed your faith and hope in wealth? Or have you gotten lost in a cycle of comparison with others? How has God blessed you? What are some things you have that others don't? Stop and list five things in your life that you are grateful for. Thank God for each of them, and ask Him to help you focus on them when you feel the need to compare what you have to what others have.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, thank you for the many ways you have blessed me. Remind me of those things, both large and small, that come from you and bring me joy. When the world tries to tell me that I don't have enough, fill my heart with contentment. Let me remember that you are responsible for every good thing in my life. When I begin to compare my life and my wealth or possessions with others, help me to see that I'm not lacking in anything. Give me peace, so that I can be truly thankful for what I have and the things you have in store for me.

Day 14

When I began student teaching, I was excited to gain real-world experience in the classroom. Beforehand, I had taught a few lessons, mostly with a partner or small group of classmates to help plan and execute things. Now, I got to step into a room full of eight-year-olds and be in charge with my supervising teacher there to lead the way and offer guidance as I was given more responsibilities. After I finished my courses and got my teaching license, I got to substitute in a fifth grade classroom from August to December for a maternity leave. I had some resources left for me, but most of the day-to-day duties and responsibilities of being a teacher fell to me. Then I got another, similar sub position at a different school from March to May. All the work that came with those jobs and other substitute teaching I did helped prepare me for bigger things. That summer, I got hired to teach fifth grade in the same classroom as that first long-term sub position. By doing good work in a temporary job, the building principal saw that she could trust me with a permanent one. I've been teaching in that same classroom ever since.

God gives us that same deal when it comes to spiritual and worldly matters. In the book of Luke, Jesus tells us,

“If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people's things, why should you be trusted with things of your own? No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money (Luke 16:10-13, New Living Translation).”

If we work hard and show we can be trusted on a small scale, we will one day be entrusted with larger responsibilities. The same goes with our money. If we show that we can't handle a small amount, God won't bless us with more. Or if He tries, we could easily squander it. If, instead, we do well with a little, He will see that we can do well with more. His blessings will come our way, whether it's through a raise or a new, higher paying job, or by answering prayers that we've been sending up to him for a long time. God wants to give to us abundantly, but we have to show that we can be trusted with that abundance.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Have you shown God that you can be trusted with the small things He's given you responsibility over? How can you change the way you act so that He will feel confident in giving you more? Think about your duties at work and within your family. Are you performing them to the best of your ability? Target a change you can make this week and write it down.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, examine my life. Reveal an area where I can improve and show you that I'm capable of handling more. Honor my effort, whether it's at work, at home, or another area of my life. Give me the strength to do right by You with the added blessings you have waiting for me. Help me to make you proud.

Day 15

My wife and I don't make a lot of money. I teach, and she teaches and makes art. We love the work we do. But neither of our jobs pays very much. But that's okay. Our bills are paid. We have everything we need. Our home is filled with love and laughter, and we can treat ourselves now and again. With our meager funds, we do our best to give back to God. We might not tithe every week or always reach that 10%, but we try to be faithful to Him, since He is so faithful in His blessings to us. Sometimes that means we donate hygiene items to the Community Basket or drop a few extra dollars in the Soda Pop Sunday collection for school kids in Jamaica. We don't have a lot, but we know that there are others who have less.

Paul wrote several letters to his younger colleague, Timothy. They are filled with advice, especially on guiding the leaders in the early church. In one of these letters, he writes:

“Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life (1 Timothy 6:17-19, New Living Translation).”

God wants us to be rich in spirit, to be filled with love and generosity, rather than rich in money and possessions. He put us in this world to be in community and to care for one another. Now, I'm not saying that you have to sell everything you have and give all your money and stuff away to those in need (although Jesus makes the case for doing just that in Luke 18:18-30, if you want to see what he has to say about that). What I am saying is, don't cling so tightly to what you have that you rob others of a blessing you are capable of providing them. Listen to God's whispers. Maybe He's calling you to donate something to a local charity, food pantry, or non-profit. If you can't give financially, there are so many other ways you can bless others! Share your other assets: spend time with someone, show some love by checking in with a friend or coworker, offer rides in your car, open your home to those who need it, share a skill with another person, bless someone with a handmade item, cook a meal for someone who's sick, grieving, or just become a new parent. Loosen your grip on your earthly treasures so that God can bring you heavenly treasure.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. What can you give? Open yourself to hear God's whispers or feel His promptings in your heart. Let him lead you away from your stuff and toward the love and connection to others that help us find meaning in life.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, reveal Your will for my life. Show me how I can bless someone else this week. Stir within me so that I can be Your hands and feet in this world. Use my money, possessions, time, talents, and love to encourage someone. Help me to show someone a glimpse of who You are today.

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My wife and I don't make a lot of money. I teach, and she teaches and makes art. We love the work we do. But neither of our jobs pays very much. But that's okay. Our bills are paid. We have everything we need. Our home is filled with love and laughter, and we can treat ourselves now and again. With our meager funds, we do our best to give back to God. We might not tithe every week or always reach that 10%, but we try to be faithful to Him, since He is so faithful in His blessings to us. Sometimes that means we donate hygiene items to the Community Basket or drop a few extra dollars in the Soda Pop Sunday collection for school kids in Jamaica. We don't have a lot, but we know that there are others who have less.

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Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. What can you give? Open yourself to hear God's whispers or feel His promptings in your heart. Let him lead you away from your stuff and toward the love and connection to others that help us find meaning in life.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, reveal Your will for my life. Show me how I can bless someone else this week. Stir within me so that I can be Your hands and feet in this world. Use my money, possessions, time, talents, and love to encourage someone. Help me to show someone a glimpse of who You are today.



Week Four

Day 16

Have you ever had something taken from you? You could have been robbed. Or had a neighbor keep your misdelivered package for themselves. It might have even been something as simple as someone taking your yogurt from the office refrigerator. Any scenario like that leads to a breaking of trust. There was some expectation between you and the offending party, whether it was the general rules of society and decency toward your fellow human beings or the understanding that when your name is written on an item in a shared fridge you don't take what isn't yours. This is even harder to overcome when a trusted leader is the one who lets you down.

Jesus referred to such false teachers, who deceived the Jewish people in their desperation to reconnect with God, when he proclaimed himself as the "Good Shepherd." He often spoke in parables and stories, sometimes to hide his true message from his enemies and other times to give a tangible illustration for a spiritual concept. In the Gospel of John, Jesus compared his followers to sheep. People at the time would be familiar with the animals, the shepherds who watched over them, and the perils sheep faced from thieves and robbers. Here, Jesus establishes himself as the real deal, the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament, the first half of the Bible.

"So he explained it to them: 'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep (John 10:7-11, New Living Translation).'"

People may step up and try to claim that they know the way to God. But without Jesus, they're nothing but thieves who want to rob us of our time, our faith, our money. Jesus is the way to peace. He will help us in our struggles. He gave His life so that we could be forgiven of our sins. We are destined to stumble and fall, but Jesus intercedes for us. Follow His path for your life, and He will lead you to greater knowledge and understanding of God.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Are you listening to messages that keep you from following Jesus? Think about the people you look up to and the messages behind their words. Which ones are leading you down the path to peace? Which ones are leading you away from Jesus?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing me back to You through your Son, Jesus. Bring me guidance through your scripture, so that I can focus on Your words and draw closer to you. Give me the discernment I need to pinpoint the negative influences in my life and remove them. Surround me with people who will build me up and help me stay on the path through Jesus' gate.

Day 17

Some days are hard. Your boss hands down another list of tasks to complete. Traffic congestion makes you late for a doctor's appointment. Your spouse or your significant other or your kids or your pets or your neighbors are on your last nerve. Everything seems to be going wrong, all the stress in the world is resting on your shoulders and echoing in your head, and the only response that makes sense is to take a month-long vacation and not tell anyone where you're going. It's at those moments when you're worn thin that Satan likes to come a-knockin'. When life is good, and you can feel God's presence near you, it's much easier to ignore a little nudge to do something you shouldn't. But when you're exhausted, spiritually drained, or just at the end of yourself, that's when it gets real. You might yell at the next person who asks you for something. Or you make a turn to the drive-thru even though you're trying to make healthier food choices. Or you pull out your phone and order a little gift to cheer yourself up despite the dwindling numbers in your bank account. Satan doesn't come for us when we're strong. He lies in wait. And he knows just the right moment to strike.

But there's hope! It might not seem like it, but there's always hope. God is on our side, even when we can't feel him near. Sometimes that's a conscious decision on our parts. We just want to indulge or let go of control for a moment or two, and ignoring God turns off our conscience long enough to let sin get a foothold. Let Paul's words to the early church in Corinth encourage you. He writes,

"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure (1 Corinthians 10:13, New Living Translation)."

Have you ever felt tempted to go against your better judgment but been stopped before you could go through with it? You got a phone call or a text message from a friend or loved one to check in. Someone stopped by your office to ask a question. Just the right song came on the radio. You are not alone. I am not alone. We all go through these same trials and temptations. True, your struggles and mine won't look the same. Everyone faces a different battle. But we're all in the middle of one. Satan is our adversary, the one fighting against us. But God is our great defender. When we are weak, He is strong. All it takes is your willingness to admit that you can't do it by yourself. God wants good things for us all. Even when we're overwhelmed, He's ready to pull us out. We just need to reach out a hand and call for Him.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Have you fallen short of where you want to be this week? Are you in the middle of a battle right now? Take heart! The God of the universe, the one who knows you best and loves you most, is in your corner. Admit your sins to Him. Tell him where you've messed up. But don't leave it at that. Ask Him for help. Let His forgiveness wash over you, so that you can heal and remember to call out to him the next time you face that temptation.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, forgive me of my sins. Show me the triggers that lead me down a path toward sin, so that I can recognize them and turn to You instead. Remind me of the ways you have brought me out of sin in the past. Help me to focus on the good things in my life, the ways I've helped others and shown the world your love. You forget my screw ups when I ask for forgiveness. Grant me the ability to do the same.

Day 18

I don't know what I'd do without my phone when I travel somewhere new. Google Maps has saved me and my family many hours of heartache and frustration, trying to navigate in an unfamiliar place. That is, when we use it. There have been a few times when we're going somewhere we've been before but not recently or often enough to remember the whole way there. But we'll hit a point near the finish line when I say, "Oh, I remember now. You can turn Maps off." And then there's Kalamazoo.

A couple summers ago, Team Shaffer took a short trip to Michigan. We had plans in South Haven, but booked a cheaper hotel in Kalamazoo, which was an hour away. We spent the day at the beach and walking around the shops. Then we were going to check into our hotel, drop off our luggage, and find a local place in Kalamazoo to have dinner. We love to eat at local places when we're on vacation, and with our hotel in a college town, we figured we'd be good to go. I knew which way to head into town, but we didn't use our phones to give us directions. So we drove. And drove. And drove. All three of us were getting hangry (you know, angry because you're hungry), and all we wanted was to find a place to eat. The concrete medians in the roads made it difficult to get turned around, and we felt hopelessly lost. If we had just stopped to ask for directions, or gotten a destination from Google Maps, imagine the stress we would have avoided. A little guidance from a knowledgeable source would have gone a long way.

It's kind of that way with sin. Sometimes we recognize it as it approaches. We can see the warning signs and call on God to help us. But other times we say, "I don't need help. I can do this on my own." How often does that work in your favor? In my experience, not very often. Scripture offers some clear advice on this matter.

"Search for the Lord and for his strength; continually seek him (1 Chronicles 16:11, New Living Translation)."

Just like we have to stay connected to GPS in order to get to an unknown destination, we must renew our search for God every day. When sin tries to creep in, it will take any foothold it can get. Don't trust your own strength, when God is ready and willing to lend you His. Every morning, renew your search for God.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Have you been searching for God? Maybe you do now and then. But when was the last time you really spent time looking for Him? Do you feel sin creeping into your life, trying to take control of your heart? Remember that sin is strong, but God is stronger. With His help, we can overcome it. Focus on that hope today.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, open my ears to hear your promptings better today. Remind me of your presence throughout my day, especially when I'm faced with the temptation to sin. Grant me the humility necessary to admit my weakness and the strength to ask for Your help. Thank you for being close by and walking through life with me.

Day 19

I had glasses as a kid. And boy were they big. I didn't realize it back then, but I had pretty bad luck with glasses. Somewhere there's a box filled with my broken, damaged, mistreated glasses. I must have cost my parents a small fortune. Sometimes it was the nosepieces that broke off, or one of the legs got bent out too far. There was a time when I would have to tighten the screws that held my lenses in place. I thought it was fun to use the tiny screwdrivers necessary for the job. It must have been around then that I lost one of my lenses. It was winter, and my sister and I were out building a snowman. Mom was gone, and Dad was awake to keep an eye on us if we needed it. I don't remember if Whitney and I were throwing snowballs at each other or if it was just a fluke, but one of my giant lenses fell out of my glasses. Into a foot or more of snow. Immediately, my heart dropped. As much as we had disturbed the snow, I couldn't see where it had landed. I searched desperately for a few minutes to no avail. If Mom were home, I'd have rushed inside and asked for her help. But Dad would just yell at me. So my sister and I went inside, and I pretended that everything was fine. I had the cartoonish idea of bringing a hair dryer on an extension cord out to melt the snow around our snowman until the lens was found. But I abandoned the search until Mom got home. I don't remember being left with half a pair of glasses, so I'm pretty sure Mom found it. But I gave up when things got difficult.

Because God isn't a physical presence with us, looking for Him can be a daunting task. But unlike my clear lens in a pile of white snow, He's not hard to find. The prophet Jeremiah, like a modern-day pastor, wrote a letter to God's people after they were exiled from their home. In it he writes,

“If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me (Jeremiah 29:13, New Living Translation).”

God wants us to connect with Him. He wants us to seek him out and to know Him more. But too often we find that search to be too difficult or time-consuming or stressful, and we give up. But God's waiting for us to push a little farther, to try a little harder, to reach out a little longer, until we find him. God doesn't hide from us. He's ready to be found. We just need to look for Him.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. When did you last look for God? Did you find Him in your search, or did you find the task too much to handle? Close your eyes and focus on God right now. Think about His goodness and mercy. Remember His blessings and His comforting words from Scripture. Wait for a few minutes and let Him meet you in that stillness. If you don't feel God's presence today, don't despair. Continue to search for Him, and you will find Him.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, increase my endurance and patience. I want to know You better. Please help me to empty my mind of distracting thoughts, so that I can hear Your voice. Stir within my spirit and meet with me today. Give me the wisdom to understand the difference between my own thoughts and Your words in my heart. Remind me to seek you regularly, not just from time to time. I know You are always with me, but help me to truly feel that today.

Day 20

When I got my teaching license and re-entered the working world, my daughter was three months old. I had a long-term subbing job lined up, guaranteeing work for five months. Afterward, I put my name on several substitute teaching call lists for nearby corporations. I got calls most days, and sometimes had to turn down a job because I already had something lined up, but there were stretches when I didn't hear anything. Money was tight, especially with day care costs starting up, and my wife and I felt like we were reaching the end of our rope. Things were hard, and it felt like nothing was going to change. But when we stopped and looked at the situation, we were trying to handle everything on our own. There was an emotional conversation that ended in both of us crying and the realization that we hadn't taken our struggles and doubts and fears to God. We sat together and prayed. Then we brought those same concerns to our small group and asked for their prayers and support. Soon afterward, I got word of another long-term subbing position out of town. I got the job, which led to work for another three months. As that school year wound down, I went to a few interviews and was soon hired at the school where I work now. Life got a little difficult, but it became tougher the longer we went without seeking the Kingdom of God.

Jesus knew we would worry, especially about money. But he brought us this reassurance,

“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need (Matthew 6:33, New Living Translation).”

God is the source of all good things. He watches over us, helps us through low valleys, and leads us up tall hills and mountains. That journey is much more difficult when we try to do it on our own. It's not impossible, don't get me wrong. There are plenty of people who go through life without God, either by choice or by ignorance of His love and mercy. But from my personal experience, the journey of life is much easier when I turn to God and trust Him to get me to the next stop along the way. Don't try to go it alone. Your Heavenly Father is ready to guide you as soon as you give him permission to do so.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Are you walking through a valley today? Have you brought your pain and despair to God? He wants to lift your burden, but you have to be willing to let it go. Think back over the past week. When were things easy? Were you spending more time in prayer or reading the Bible? When were things difficult? Were you giving yourself over to God? What concerns can you bring to Him today?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, I know that life isn't always easy. When times get tough, remind me that You are with me. Soften my heart, so that I can hear Your whispers and feel Your presence when I'm struggling. Give me the wisdom to know when I'm relying on my own strength instead of yours. When I find myself overwhelmed by my life, return my thoughts to those moments when You walked beside me and helped me through. Open my hands, so that I can let go of control and offer it up to You.



Week Five

Day 21

My mom has planted a vegetable garden in her backyard for years. Growing up, I always looked forward to home-grown tomatoes. There were usually green beans, zucchinis, and pumpkins, too. Recently, my daughter Zoey and I went to visit her and took a look at her garden. We saw tiny white flowers and the little green cherry tomatoes that sprout from them. There were long, green beans growing on creeping plants, and several vines stretching across the garden and twisting up the tomato cages. My mom said she didn't remember if she planted pumpkins or zucchinis at that end of the garden. Their blossoms look almost identical, and none of the four plants had started growing fruit yet. Without seeing what the vines produced, we didn't know exactly what they were. About a week later, I got a message with a couple pictures, saying that the plants had cross-pollinated and sprouted vegetables that were long like zucchinis but were turning orange like pumpkins. She'd grown zumpkins!

How do you identify a plant in a garden? Sometimes all it takes is to look at it. Or even a quick sniff. I can pick out a tomato plant just by the smell of it, even if there aren't any buds yet. But if you're unsure, wait until it bears fruit. My mom didn't know if she had zucchinis or pumpkins, but it was easy to figure out once the fruits sprouted on the vines.

Our lives work the same way. People can tell what kind of person you are based on the fruit you bear. Now, we don't grow physical fruit, but we do grow spiritual fruit. Paul lists them in one of his letters to the early churches.

“But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things (Galatians 5:22-23, New Living Translation).”

When we're connected to God's Holy Spirit, our lives produce those nine things. They don't all grow at once, and many of us grow a few of them much more easily than others. Maybe you are filled with joy. It floods your spirit and spills over into those around you. But self-control needs more time and attention in the garden of your heart. Or perhaps gentleness comes easily to you. That fruit grows even when you're going through a spiritual drought. But the plot where patience should be is barren. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, but the important thing is that you see some of these spiritual fruits forming as we walk with God. When others look at your life, they should see evidence that you're connected to the Holy Spirit. The fruits of the spirit help them identify you as a child of God.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. What fruits of the spirit do people see when they look at you? Which ones are you missing? Ask God to help you in areas where you're lacking. Look around at the people in your life who have those fruits your missing. They could be a good source of advice and inspiration. Who can you reach out to in order to start growing those fruits more easily?

Prayer—Heavenly Father, let others see You through me. Touch my heart so that I can grow the fruits of the spirit, especially the ones that have been difficult for me to produce in the past. You know my struggles. Please lead me to a mentor who can help me grow a garden that has all nine fruits, so that I may find balance, draw closer to You, and show others how they can find fulfillment through connection with You.

Day 22

Many wedding ceremonies include an excerpt from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. It has become known as the "Love Chapter." You may have heard these words before.

"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, New Living Translation)."

Adding to these ideas about love is this verse from 1 John:

"Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7-8, New Living Translation)."

I once heard it said that you can replace the word "love" with "God" in the "Love Chapter," and you'll find a perfect description of God.

But let me present you with a challenge: Replace the word "love" with **your name** in the "Love Chapter," and see if it describes you. We are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus, walking through this world and showing His love, kindness, and mercy to those who are far from Him. Yesterday, we looked at the fruits of the spirit. The first one on the list is love. If you want to grow the fruit of love in your heart, then you must work hard to embody the "Love Chapter" in your everyday life, as hard as some of those tasks may prove. Be patient and kind. Don't be jealous, boastful, proud, or rude. Never give up, never lose faith, always be hopeful, and endure through every circumstance. Piece of cake, right?

Will you stumble and fall as you try to live out the "Love Chapter" through your words and actions? Absolutely. Only God can do it perfectly. But that's no reason not to try. By working hard to live a life that resembles Christ's, you're making God accessible to people that might not feel like they can ever get to know Him themselves. Do your best to be love, give of yourself to others, and they will have the opportunity to connect with the one who knows them best and loves them most. When we love, we become softer, gentler people. Everyone is a work in progress, and some struggle with this more than others. But for love to flourish in your relationships, you have to let God's standard of love consume you. Let the light of your life lead others on a path toward God.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. What aspect of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 can you commit to live out today? Which parts come naturally to you? Which prove more difficult? Choose one from the "difficult" list and begin practicing it today. Let your words and actions become more like Christ, so that you can lead others to God.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, I want to love like You. Remind me to refer back to the "Love Chapter." Pull at my heart and help me see the people in my life who I can lead to You. Erase my self-doubt and build my confidence, so that I can speak without fear and spread your love to a broken world. Use me to make a great impact on Earth.

Day 23

I recently ran the mile with my students in P.E. It's a small way to help me stay healthy and active, and it's a great way to build connections with my class. Everyone partners up. One half runs, while the other half tracks of their partners' laps. I hadn't run a single, timed mile in a while, so I set a time goal to meet or beat and started running. Lots of kids took off sprinting, and many lapped me, but I ended up lapping them back by running at a consistent pace. I beat my goal time, and spent the next several minutes walking laps to cool down. As I came around the gym for the fifth or sixth time, I noticed that only a few kids were left running. I asked one of the lap trackers how many her partner had left.

"Two." That was all I needed. I joined that student where she was walking and told her I would help her finish strong. I asked if she'd be willing to jog at a slow pace with me, and she did. In those last two laps, we gathered a crowd. Kids who had finished running and their tracking partners followed along with us. We chanted her name, and she finished her 20th lap at the front of the pack. We had come together to encourage her in a difficult task, and I think our class community is a little stronger for it.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

"Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others (1 Corinthians 10:24, New Living Translation)."

When we help others succeed, we do so ourselves. What good is it for you to prosper, when those around you are struggling and need help that you can provide? Sometimes all it takes is to walk beside someone and encourage them. We are nothing without friends and family, both literal and figurative, to love and support us. We function best in community. Family, close friends, small group members. They can form a powerful support network. Life isn't always easy, and God helps us when we find ourselves in times of trouble. But sometimes that help comes directly from your support network. And just the same, you can lift up your friends and family when they're down. It doesn't cost anything to lend a hand or give an encouraging word, so get out there and work for the good of others.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Who have you come to rely on when you're down? Who have you surrounded yourself with to pick you up when you fall? Now, flip things around. Who in your life could use that kind of support from you? What kind of struggles have you seen where you can offer help to someone in need? How can you give of yourself today so that one more person makes it to the finish line with their head held high? Think about the power you have to build up others and restore their faith in both humanity and God. Don't let it slip through your fingers today.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, fix my eyes on others today. Prompt me to use the gifts with which you have blessed me to help others. Whether it's something as simple as writing an encouraging note or raking a neighbor's leaves, or a much bigger task like volunteering at a local charity or going on a mission trip, remind me to work for the good of others. Turn my heart from laziness and selfishness and toward love and compassion. Use me to help others in a powerful way, not just today but more and more with each passing day. Thank you for the ways that others have helped me. Now lead me to pay it forward.

Day 24

One day, I was at the grocery store, loading the belt at the cash register. The young woman at the front of the line was checking on the price of her groceries as they were being rung up. She told the cashier that she shouldn't spend over fifty dollars. She had a couple little boys in her cart, and I thought about how tough it can be to make ends meet when you have young children. I felt a prompting in my heart to pull out my debit card and pay for whatever she still had that went over her budget. Then the woman in line between us said she wanted to pay for all the first woman's groceries. The young mother teared up and thanked the other woman, explaining that she was getting food for her two boys and only had fifty dollars cash on her to pay for it. I wasn't even the one getting help, and I got choked up in the line. I had been blessed by simply watching someone else get blessed.

Kindness and love are funny that way. It's easy to think of them as having a finite supply. You only have so much to give out. But in reality, the more we give them out, the more we find in ourselves. King Solomon noted this phenomenon himself when he wrote,

“The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed (Proverbs 11:25, New Living Translation).”

Helping others helps you, too. Have you ever done something for someone, seen the joy or relief it brought them, and felt your own heart swell? Just like the feeling I got at the grocery store, we take heart when people show generosity and offer to refresh others through their actions. Rarely have I ever helped someone and left thinking, “Well that was a waste of my time.” Sure, sometimes it's not convenient to offer your help. Or the person who needs help is someone you don't get along with. Or you just don't have the time. And it's okay to stay on schedule or shy away from an uncomfortable situation. But if you feel a prompting from God, a nudge in your heart or mind, to step out of your comfort zone or risk running a little behind for the sake of someone else, trust Him and lend a hand, bring refreshment to a weary spirit, show some generosity. You may be surprised at what that act will do for you as much as it will do for the other person.

God uses us to bless others, but He doesn't leave us empty-handed. He fills our spirits with joy in those moments. And we can build relationships that weren't there before or strengthen ones that are weak, so that when we find ourselves in need there are others out there ready and willing to bless us. Generosity can be tough to extend to others, especially if you've been conditioned to hold onto what you have, to hoard your resources so you don't run out of what you need. But it can be learned. And it's never too late to begin. Start today, and let God plunge you into a cycle of blessings that will leave you and those around you in a better state than where any of you started.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Are you a generous person? Or are you stingy? Is God calling you to live a more generous life? Listen for his promptings, so that He can bless you through the ways you will bless others. Ask him to teach you how to show generosity with your time, talents, and resources.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, You have blessed me with so much. Help me to trust You enough to share that with others. When I find myself being selfish with what I have, remind me of how others have refreshed my soul with their generosity. Let their example guide me today and in the days to come, so that I can bring blessings to others and feel Your blessings return to me in the process.

Day 25

I love to play games with my family and friends. Board games, card games, video games, tabletop games. They're all great. I really like to win. Who doesn't? I can even deal with losing. It's when I feel like I'm being unapologetically trounced that losing gets tough. I used to get frustrated when I'd lose game after game of Skip-Bo against my wife. To this day, I lose approximately 95% of the time. But we have fun, and now it's a running joke with us. What makes losing the worst is when the winner brags. Sarah and I have worked hard to teach Zoey that no matter who wins, it's important to shake hands and say, "Good game." No matter how much you want to cheer for yourself after a victory or flip the table when you're beaten. I won't say I'm perfect here – I may have done a touchdown dance or two after winning a card game with the family – but I know how much harder it is to lose graciously when it feels like someone's rubbing their win in your face.

This applies to more than just games. Do you have a friend or coworker or neighbor or family member that likes to show off when they get a raise or a promotion, win a contest, or things are just going their way? Are you that person in your family, workplace, neighborhood, or friend group? Even if you're working hard, when someone brags about their successes and accomplishments, it can bring the rest of us down. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul wrote,

“Don't be selfish: don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves (Philippians 2:3, New Living Translation).”

Let's be honest: No one likes a bragger. When the time is right, celebrate your successes with those who are close to you and know how important those victories are. But everyone will get along better if you stop tooting your own horn. Remember how it feels when others do that around you.

God calls us to be humble, to think of others as better than ourselves. Pastor Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, put it this way: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less. Humility is thinking more of others.” Turn your focus from yourself and place it on others. How can you help encourage them and build them up today? When you spend time investing in other people, you get a boost, too. We rise by lifting others.

Take a moment to reflect on today's devotional and scripture. Use the space below to write your responses. Are you a bragger? Do you want people to turn and look your way when life is good? How can you turn the spotlight on someone else today? What friend/coworker/neighbor/family member could use that encouragement today? Open your heart and let God bring you the name of a person you can lift up instead of bringing praise and attention to yourself. Write that name below and pray for God to reveal how you can make a difference for that person in the coming days and weeks.

Prayer—Heavenly Father, You have done great things in my life. I have overcome great obstacles, and You have carried me through some difficult challenges. But I am here now and ready to make a difference for those around me. Thank you for being my source of happiness, for turning my focus away from my circumstances, my own desires, my finances, my pleasure seeking, and my selfishness. Help me to remember that You are greater than all those things. Guide me today, so that I can be a force for good in the world. Allow me the chance to lead others to You, so that they might know this happiness for themselves. It's in your precious name that I pray. Amen.