

WEEK EIGHT • DAY ONE

GRATITUDE AND JOY

HEAR MY PRAYER

WEEKEND!

WHEN PRAYER IS DIFFICULT...

MAKE IT A DAILY PRACTICE

Sometimes, prayer can be exceedingly difficult. Yes, prayer is a conversation with God; but it's not quite like talking to a friend sitting across the table. Trying to communicate with someone we can't see can be tough.

Thinking of prayer as a habit can make it simpler. I call my parents every Monday evening to check in and to update them on my week. Calling home has become a habit, and I feel odd if I don't call. I try to view prayer in a similar way—as regularly checking in with God. My dad would set five alarms on his watch to go off throughout the day. When the alarms sounded, no matter where he was, he would pause to say a prayer. His prayers were not always long or complex, but this practice kept him in the habit of communicating with God.

If you want to pray more often, make it a daily habit. Set an alarm on your phone or pray when you're eating lunch or changing classes. Pairing an activity with prayer will help you connect to God and build a stronger prayer life. Even if you don't know what to say, keep the appointment. Romans 8:26 (NRSV) says that in those times when we don't know how or what to pray, God's Spirit intercedes for us "with sighs too deep for words."

Todd Naevestad [Davis, Illinois]

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WEEK EIGHT • DAY ONE

GRATITUDE AND JOY

HEAR MY PRAYER

WEEKEND!

TRUST GOD TO HEAR UNSPOKEN PRAYERS

Prayer is amazingly beautiful. It is an intimate, powerful way of communicating with God. Through prayer, we speak to God and God speaks to us. It's a divine conversation that strengthens our faith.

Sometimes in prayer, words flow effortlessly; we have so much to say, so much to ask, so much for which to thank God. At other times, however, we can't find the exact words to say, so we decide not to pray at all, or we wait until we feel like praying. Still other times, life becomes so tough that we don't have the strength to pray or to continue praying about a situation that has gone on for a long time. And in an emergency, we may not have the time.

When prayer seems difficult, we can be encouraged because God hears even our unspoken prayers. Our tears have a voice. Our sighs, groans, whispers, and desires all become prayers. Unspoken prayers express thanks, cry out for help, and ask for wisdom. They are genuine, and God hears and answers them too. God knows us inside and out and can interpret what we're trying to say, no matter how we say it.

Nakia Gater [Orlando, Florida]



26 NEXT DAY STRETCH

Begin a prayer practice that helps you remember to pray during the good times so that when life gets tough, talking with God will be a natural response. If you need an idea, try one or more of these:

START A GRATITUDE JOURNAL:
Each day, write in your journal things that happened during the day for which you are grateful. Try to list at least 5 things each day. In difficult times, read back through your entries and remember your blessings.

TRY A GRATITUDE JAR:
If you are not into journaling, write on slips of paper the things you are grateful for during the day, and drop them into a jar or container. When you are having a rough day or season, read these papers and be reminded that God is at work to bring good out of every situation.

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february 20-28

WEEK EIGHT • DAY ONE

GRATITUDE AND JOY

HEAR MY PRAYER

WEEKEND!



REMEMBER TO PRAY IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

God is with us when bad things happen and also when good things happen. We can practice praying and praising God all the time.

Remembering to pray is easier when we're struggling. When we are going through hard times or even having a bad day, we cry out to God and ask for help. But during the good times? Not so much.

Too often we forget that God has blessed us with everything we have: family, friends, work, food, clothing, shelter. God has given us opportunities to live our dreams. Every day is filled with reasons to pray and to offer praises for all that God has done in our lives. And practicing our prayers when times are good will make it easier to come to God when life is difficult and words don't flow.

Bethany Acker, 21 [Plover, Wisconsin]

EXAMINE YOUR DAY:

In your mind, replay the events of the day as if you were watching a movie. Recall the highs and lows, the times you felt loved or unloved, the times you were grateful or ungrateful. Notice where you saw God. Then pay attention to the ways God shows up tomorrow.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS:

Before going to sleep each night, take time to name the blessings you received that day, and give thanks to God. Then think of ways to use your blessings to bless others.

PRAY FOR OTHERS:

Throughout each day, pray for people you know or encounter who are facing difficult times. These prayers might become the ones you offer for yourself when you are struggling and cannot seem to find words to pray.

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JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2017 **61**

WEEK EIGHT • DAY TWO

GRATITUDE AND JOY

GRATITUDE

WEEKEND!

ANDREW GARLAND BREEDEN

16 for times of **sadness**

The challenge of writing on the theme of gratitude is to avoid becoming trite and sentimental, reducing the subject matter, which is actually quite serious, to something stale. A simpler task would be to make a list of all the good and obvious things we should be grateful for and why we should be grateful for them. But that list would not include circumstances that aren't so obviously good. What can we say about the good things—emotions, experiences, and events—that come to us in disguise and hardly seem good at all?



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WEEK EIGHT • DAY TWO

GRATITUDE AND JOY

GRATITUDE

WEEKEND!

Life is filled with difficulty and disappointment. Relationships fail; people let us down; plans do not work out. And, to be frank, we are not well equipped to handle the pain life hands us.

Consider these words from *Letters to a Young Poet*, by Rainer Maria Rilke: **“Were it possible for us to see further than our knowledge reaches, . . . perhaps we would endure our sadnesses with greater confidence than our joys. For they are the moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown.”**

Rilke was saying something important to a young person who, in his own day, was experiencing the difficulties and disappointments of life. (*Letters to a Young Poet* offers depths of wisdom no matter what your age or when you are living. It is well worth reading.)

Why would we give thanks for life's troubles in the same way we thank God for all the good that comes our way? In moments of sadness, we often learn

Andrew Garland Breeden
is from Charlotte, Tennessee.

something about ourselves; and through difficult times, we can come into our own. All the other moments, the ones that are plainly good and happy times, stand on the periphery and look in. They are good, and yet we are not as likely to learn from them.

In each sadness and in each moment of distress, we encounter knowledge about ourselves that we must reach out and take hold of. Do not misunderstand. To be grateful for our pain is not to say we learn to be comfortable with it or that we seek it out. Plenty of pain will come our way without our looking for it. But what would change in our lives if we could be grateful for times of sadness, for those moments when, as Rilke says, “something new has entered into us, something unknown”? <

17 NEXT DAY STRETCH

This week, think about how you might cultivate a posture of gratitude toward all your emotions, events, and experiences. Recall a recent disappointment or difficulty. What have you learned about yourself as a result of this experience? How have you grown? Say a prayer thanking God for this time of sadness in your life.

WEEK EIGHT • DAY THREE

GRATITUDE AND JOY

BEYOND THE BLUES

I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all day long I go around mourning.

Psalm 38:6 (NRSV)

PRAYING THE PSALMS 18

Salina McGinniss, 22 [Scranton, Pennsylvania]

Many of David's psalms begin with despair. He's suffering, and he can't see a way out. Psalm 38:10 (NRSV) says:

**My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.**

The psalms resonated with me during the dark depression that plagued my teenage years. The aching in my chest, the deadness in my eyes, the exhaustion—I was comforted to know that David, a man after God's own heart, felt the same way.

More inspiring is David's response to his pain. After he cries out to God, he seems to pause for breath and then to speak of God's character and promises. David writes in Psalm 38:15 (NRSV):

**But it is for you, O Lord, that I wait;
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.**

David recognizes that God would bring him through the trials he faced; he had only to wait patiently.

As God carried David through times of despair, God brought me through the depression I faced. Now I can say in the words of Psalm 30:11 (NRSV):

**You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy. <**

PRAY THE PSALMS:

**Let the psalms
express your
feelings and give
you hope. Read
aloud Psalm 38.
Then read Psalm 42.**



WEEK EIGHT • DAY FOUR

GRATITUDE AND JOY

ENOUGH FOR
TODAY

WEEKEND!

STEVE MATTHEWS

it is enough

Being self-employed can be great. Right now, I am sitting outside working on my computer while the cat lounges nearby and the dryer tosses my clothes through the final cycle. Not a bad work environment. On the other hand, worrying about money and contracts is not so great. If I'm not careful, I can live each day with persistent anxiety about what is not getting done and constant worry about what my life will be like when my current contract expires in six months.

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september 1-8

WEEK EIGHT • DAY FOUR

GRATITUDE AND JOY

ENOUGH FOR
TODAY

WEEKEND!

Sometimes, my anxiety is grounded in reality: I need to pay attention to income and resources. But I also need to make sure I am engaging in practices that point me to the ever-present resource I have in God—the presence of love and possibility that accompanies me and nudges me toward an assurance of abundant life despite the external ups and downs. I need practices that remind me that God’s love and presence is enough for today.

In Exodus, we read stories of God’s providence and grace as the children of Israel traveled across the desert toward the promised land. Their journey was not extravagant by any stretch of the imagination. But God sent a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide them (Exodus 13:17-22), and daily God provided manna and quail for them to eat (Exodus 16). They had enough for each day.

What blessing is the equivalent of manna and quail in your life? What, like the pillar of cloud or fire, helps you to see or sense God’s presence and guidance? We might think of prayer as a time of asking God for help; but prayer is also slowing down, paying attention, and reflecting on our day with heartfelt gratitude. Even when we, like the children of Israel, experience times when our future seems uncertain, we can have a sense of God’s love and providence.

In the story of the Exodus, the people were guided and sustained by God; but perhaps their greatest provision was the way God showed up in their community as they traveled together. We don’t have many stories about the Israelite’s daily interactions, but this group was learning what it means to be in covenant relationship with God and with one another. They were learning interdependence through the long, challenging journey across the desert. God shows up as “enough” for them—and for us—in so many ways.

Practicing gratitude, silence, and deeper awareness can nurture in us a growing sense of God’s moment-to-moment gifts. God also reminds us that we have “enough for today” when we begin to trust one another more deeply, when we borrow and lend courage and vulnerability within community. Our interdependence on God and one another is truly our manna—our bread for today—and it is enough. ◀

Steve Matthews was a youth minister for over 15 years. He is now a spiritual director, a coach working with redeveloping churches, and a Senior Associate Consultant with FaithX Strategic Missional Consulting



NEXT DAY STRETCH

For the next week, slow down for five to ten minutes a day. During these mini-vacations, notice your heartbeat and your breath. Let go of all that is unfinished in your life. Let go of your worries about the future, and reflect on God’s presence in this moment. What do you see, hear, and feel in the stillness? Reflect on how you are accompanied by others. As your time of prayer comes to an end, offer a prayer of gratitude for the gifts of “enough” today.

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WEEK EIGHT • DAY FIVE

GRATITUDE AND JOY

JOY

WEEKEND!



16

joy in the struggles

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2–4 (NIV)

GIVE GOD YOUR STRUGGLES

We often think of joy as happiness, an emotion we feel when things are good. But can we find joy when life is hard—when we lose a friend, when school is difficult, when our family struggles, when we mess up and have to deal with the consequences? James 1:2–4 sees difficult times as moments that teach us perseverance; but that doesn't mean they are easy. Yet, when we realize that in these moments we may grow and become more fully ourselves, we can begin to find joy in them. Focus today on one struggle in your life and on how you feel about it. Then lift this struggle to God, asking for help and for God's grace to persevere and to grow through this hardship. Then give thanks for the ways God works in your life that you might begin to experience joy even in the most difficult times.

Michael Bozmarov, 22 [Santa Ana, California]

Jennifer

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december 11–17

WEEK EIGHT • DAY FIVE

GRATITUDE AND JOY

JOY

WEEKEND!

TRUST THAT GOD IS AT WORK

James 1:2–4 was quoted often in our youth group, but it confused me. I would think, *The breakup I'm going through hurts! How can I be joyful about it?* Being happy about my suffering seemed impossible. As I grew older, I began to see that joy is different than happiness. Joy is a deep thankfulness for what is good, an appreciation for beauty, an abiding contentment with what you have. Joy sees God's work in every situation. If you are struggling with pain, loss, or fear, remind yourself that God is working for good in everything we experience—and if that isn't a reason for joy, I don't know what is!

Brooke Lamb [Nashville, Tennessee]

FIND STRENGTH TO MAKE IT THROUGH

I used to think that “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10c, NIV) was just a Christian version of “don't worry, be happy.” But now, as I read more of Nehemiah, I realize that this phrase is revolutionary. Nehemiah and many other Jews had been living in exile. The city of Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed. Those days were difficult and uncertain. But through prayer and action, Nehemiah organized the people to rebuild their city. The work was hard, and they faced opposition; but when they completed their labor, they gathered in joyful celebration. Nehemiah teaches us not to ignore tough times and pretend to be happy but to trust that the joy that comes from God will give us strength to make it through. <

Katie Matson-Daley [St. Paul, Minnesota]

17 NEXT DAY STRETCH

MAKE JOY A LIFESTYLE

Joy is such a simple word. Often overused or misunderstood, it may have lost its meaning. But joy isn't simply a feeling; it is a way of living. Joy offers strength in the calm and in the storm; it can be a confirmation of God's will for us. Let joy become your new standard. Let joy be what keeps you going and pressing forward. Let joy be what you share with others—a grocery store clerk, classmates, coworkers, a stranger on the street. Joy is not selfish. It cannot be contained. Let joy be your new lifestyle!

Jennifer Bushnell, 21 [Canton, Ohio]

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NOVEMBER>DECEMBER 2017 **49**

WEEK EIGHT • DAY SIX

STILLNESS/SILENCE

Silence Under the Surface

Devin Wieland

Trying Not to Panic

I sat, sweating and uncomfortable, in the back row of the van. I kept asking myself why I had agreed to do this. They had promised that the experience would draw me closer to God, but I had yet to see the evidence.

Four hours later, we unloaded the church van and enjoyed our last few gulps of fresh air. A short hike through the forest brought us to the opening of Buckner Cave, a gaping black hole carved into the side of a hill.

Jeff, our seemingly fearless leader, went into the cave without hesitating. Standing on the threshold, I turned for one last look at the fall sky. Then I entered the cave and said goodbye to sunlight, fresh smells, and cool breezes.

My first steps into the cave were cautious as I became acclimated to the damp slate beneath my feet. The daylight diminished with each step until it was gone altogether. The darkness inside the cave was smothering. I switched on my headlamp; its narrow beam showed smooth, shimmering rock on all sides.

The Quiet Place

Before long, we were on our stomachs, squeezing through small spaces. We squirmed, wriggled, and crawled for what seemed like miles. I became more fearful as I lost my sense of direction. Eventually, we emerged from a small tunnel into a wider space.

Jeff asked us to form a circle. Headlamps went off; and we sat, separated from the outside world by solid rock walls hundreds of feet thick. The silence in the cave was tangible.

Finally, Jeff's voice broke the silence. "God created this cave. Even here, God hears our prayers."

Those words set my mind reeling. We stayed quiet for a while, feeling the silence wash over us and directing our thoughts to God. Sitting in that circle, I sensed a deeper meaning in the darkness and quiet. By leaving behind my usual routine and finding this place of ultimate quiet, I had found God—or rather, I realized that God had never left me.

Seeking Silence

In time, we emerged into the daylight. With the sun still shining, it seemed as though no time had passed. Looking back at the yawning entrance of the cave, I now felt a sense of attraction rather than fear. I worried that I would never find a place as quiet and pure as the space deep within the cave.

WEEK EIGHT • DAY SIX

STILLNESS/SILENCE

On the way home, after the sun had set and most of the group was asleep, I closed my eyes and imagined that I was back in the cave. The murky smell did not return, and no wet rock spread beneath my feet; but I felt myself drawing closer to God.

I returned from that trip with new motivation to meet God in quiet places. Whether journeying under the surface of the earth or stilling my restless mind, I can always find God in the silence.

Dig Deeper

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Read Psalm 139:7-12.

Are you accustomed to background noise? Do you fear complete silence? This week, find a place or a memory in which you can be quiet. Then practice turning to silence as a way of putting aside everyday concerns and drawing closer to God.

WEEK EIGHT • DAY SEVEN

STILLNESS/SILENCE



SHHHH
WEEKEND!

AMY AND JIM STILL-PEPPER

14

try silence

Take a moment to think about all the sounds you heard yesterday. Maybe the day started with an alarm and ended with your favorite song. Some of the noise was pleasant; some was obnoxious. You might have been unaware of much of it. Yet, all of it affected you.

The prophet Elijah had a lot of noise in his life too. But wanting to hear God's voice, he discovered that he had to listen to the quietness. (Read 1 Kings 19:11-12.) I challenge you to do the same. Here are "Q-TIPS" that can help you listen to the quiet.

- Q**-uiet. Stop. Listen. Be still.
- T**-urn off the outside. Turn off your phone, music, computer. Shut the door.
- I**-nside. Slow down your thoughts. Focus your attention on this moment.
- P**-ause. Wait. Listening requires time. Reading verses from the Bible might help.

experimenting with silence

EXPERIMENT 1:

For five minutes, sit in silence. Then reflect on or journal responses to these questions:

- + Was it easier to be quiet at the beginning, middle, or end of this time?
- + Which part was most difficult? (Explain.)
- + What were you doing during the silence?
- + Do you usually like silence? (Explain.)
- + In what ways can silence be good?
- + When can silence be negative?
- + Do you need more or less silence in your life? (Explain.)
- + What did you hear in the silence?

If you were not able to be silent for five minutes or if you were silent longer, that's OK. What's important isn't the length of time, but giving God space to speak.



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WEEK EIGHT • DAY SEVEN

STILLNESS/SILENCE

SHHHH

WEEKEND!

EXPERIMENT 2

Try another five minutes of silence. Before you begin, pick a scripture—one verse or several—to read over and over. You might read Psalm 46:10, Ecclesiastes 3:7b, or a verse or passage from Elijah’s story in 1 Kings 19. During the silence, try to focus on what you are reading. Don’t journal; just read and listen, listen and read. After five minutes, reflect on or journal responses to these questions:

- + What noises did you sense?
- + What sensations were you aware of in your body?
- + What thoughts or emotions arose the longer you were silent?
- + How did you respond to those thoughts or emotions?
- + What did you hear in the silence?

EXPERIMENT 3—AN ONGOING PRACTICE

For several days in a row, practice being quiet for five minutes or longer. Each day, while you are quiet, spend some time answering a question or two from this list:

- + What’s the first thing you notice about being quiet?
- + What is the hardest thing about being quiet?
- + What do you end up thinking about or doing while you are quiet?
- + How does being quiet help you?
- + How can you spend more time being quiet?
- + What makes it hard for you to be quiet?
- + In what relationship do you need to be quieter? Why?
- + Are you sometimes too quiet? (Explain.) <

Jim and Amy Still-Pepper are married and highly value quiet time—with each other and, most importantly, with God.

15 NEXT DAY STRETCH

Listening to the quiet is not a “one and done.” Make a commitment to practice silence. Aim to practice daily, but start where you are. One or two days this week is better than none.

Let this thought encourage you: **Only when we are quiet can we fully listen. A moving mouth is like a cork to the ears and blinders to the eyes. A busy life is a roadblock to peace.**

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