

ALONE

with God

A Guide for Personal Retreats

A WORKBOOK

Ron DelBene
with Mary & Herb Montgomery

Wipf & Stock
PUBLISHERS
Eugene, Oregon

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Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Alone with God: Workbook
A Guide for Personal Retreats: A Daily Workbook for Use in Groups
By DelBene, Ron, Montgomery, Mary, and Montgomery, Herb
Copyright©1996 by DelBene, Ron, Montgomery, Mary, and Montgomery, Herb
ISBN: 1-59752-430-1
Publication date 11/1/2005
Previously published by Upper Room Books, 1996

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*In grateful appreciation for all the spiritual seekers
who have shared their lives and their stories with me*

ALSO BY THE AUTHORS

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The Breath of Life Workbook
The Hunger of the Heart Workbook
The Alone with God Workbook

Breath of Life Series

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ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK

Most of the people who come to me for spiritual direction want to make God a more integral part of their lives. Often, though, their days are so hurried and hassled that they find it difficult to fit prayer and reflection into their schedules. Thus I, along with my coauthors, created *Alone with God: A Guide for Personal Retreats*. The book is for those wanting to occasionally spend time in solitude, silence, and prayer. The time needed for a personal retreat is highly flexible: it could be an hour, a day, or a weekend.

This workbook and corresponding program have been adapted from my book *Alone with God*. The program asks that you spend 20 to 30 minutes each day with God's Word—time in which to slow your pace and listen more closely to what God is saying to you. Part of this time is spent reading the scripture story for the week. The rest is devoted to prayer, reflecting on the story and doing the daily exercise. The prayers in the back of the book are to be used as you see fit to enrich your spiritual life.

Each week in the *Alone with God* program, a single scripture story is prayed. By revisiting the same scripture daily, we discover new meanings and new applications to our lives. The weekly meetings that are part of the program provide an opportunity to share your encounter with God's Word. Through sharing our faith journey, we become companions on the way—companions who help one another put our joys and sorrows in perspective and see how God is present in the ordinary circumstances of our lives.

The video *Praying the Scriptures* (part of my video series *Praying in the Midst of Life*) is shown at the first group meeting. Through the medium of the video I am able to be a part of your group just as so many spiritual seekers have been a part of my life through their friendship and the stories they have shared.

I encourage those who come to me for spiritual direction to keep a journal. These deeply felt writings reflect some of what happens when we invite God to enter more fully into our lives. Some journal entries are included in this workbook, and all are used with the permission of the people who wrote them. In the interest of privacy, names and certain identifying details have been changed.

As we grow in faith and love, we are better able to live in the awareness of God's presence and respond to the call to love one another. Spending time alone with scripture and sharing your insights enables you to see how you are being nourished by the gift of God's Spirit and what that gift is preparing you to do. Perhaps doors that were once closed will be opened, revealing not only a need to change but a way to change. Or maybe you will feel the wondrous release of forgiveness and a sense of peace that had previously been out of reach. May the time you spend with this program nurture your spirit and take you further on the journey that brings you closer to God.

— RON DELBENE

GUIDELINES FOR GROUP MEETINGS

The *Alone With God Workbook* has six weekly group sessions and individual daily activities for thirty days. Group sessions are designed to last from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. (Many people discover that no matter how long the session, they typically have to cut off discussion.) Those participating in the program are asked to do the daily readings and reflections and attend the group sessions, understanding of course, that circumstances sometimes make that impossible.

A group of eight to twelve members is a good size. If the group is too large, it is difficult for everyone to participate in the discussion. Because members of the group will be praying and reflecting on scripture as it relates to their lives, discussions are likely to be more personal and filled with more of their own stories than might be the case in other groups.

Establish when and where the meetings will be held. If the program is used within a regular church curriculum, the meeting place will probably be predetermined. Otherwise, groups typically meet in church classrooms or parlors, or in private homes. When meetings are held in a home, make sure that directions are clear and that interruptions (children, pets, telephone) can be kept to a minimum.

There are, however, other possibilities for meeting places. A group of women meet for a long lunch at a local restaurant where they can get a private room for their meeting. Often business people gather for an early breakfast and a time of sharing.

A VCR is necessary for the first meeting. If the site you've chosen does not have a VCR available, hold your first meeting where you have access to one. Thereafter meetings can be held elsewhere.

One person from the group may act as the leader for the entire program, or a new leader can be assigned each week. This needs to be decided before or at the first meeting.

If refreshments (food and/or beverages) are served at the beginning of the meeting, do not let it delay starting on time. Serve refreshments at the end only if you are certain most of the people can stay most of the time. It does not enhance group spirit if, on a regular basis, some people have to leave while others are free to stay and continue the discussion.

Prayer is an important part of this program. Throughout the week everyone prays the same prayer; in doing so we leave ourselves open to the power that prayer has to unite us. As we prayerfully enter into the spiritual journey of others and share our own, we sense being on holy ground.

GROUP LEADERS:

- Have the room arranged ahead of time and the necessary materials on hand. You may want to have a focus table: a Bible as a reminder that we live in the presence of God's Word, a candle as a reminder that Jesus is the light of the world, flowers or a plant as a reminder that we are all part of a world that is growing and changing.
- Be warm and welcoming to everyone in the group. Name tags help people become more comfortable with one another. Even though people in the group may already be acquainted, someone may bring a guest. Name tags encased in plastic and pinned on can be made at the first meeting and worn thereafter.
- Be willing to share your personal experiences. Sharing an experience of your own encourages others to do the same.
- Encourage everyone to participate. If one or two people tend to dominate the discussion, invite others to contribute.
- Center the discussion on personal experiences. Avoid controversial issues that have the potential for becoming debates.
- Use a watch or timer to time silent reflections.
- Keep to the time schedule. If the meeting is running late, get a consensus from the group before continuing beyond the designated time.
- Make these points at every meeting: (1) Each of us is at a different place on our spiritual journey and therefore has a different view. (2) There is no one way that God calls a person and no single right way to respond to God's Spirit.

FIRST GROUP MEETING

PURPOSE:

To get acquainted and to introduce the *Alone with God* program.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- The video *Praying the Scriptures* and a VCR for showing it
- A workbook for each member of the group
- A 3" x 5" index card for each member of the group (See Step 6.)
- Watch or timer
- Bible, candle in a sturdy holder, fresh flowers or plant

PREPARATIONS:

- Have the video ready to show.
- Arrange the seating so everyone can see the video. (After the viewing you may want to rearrange the seating in a circle so people can easily see one another.)
- Create a focus table with the Bible, candle, and plant or flowers. Have the Bible open and the candle lit as people arrive.

PROCEDURE:

➤ 1. Begin with this get-acquainted exercise. Explain that you will begin with one minute of silence during which group members are to think about why they felt called to the *Alone With God* program. Ask:

- What drew you to these sessions?

(Use a watch or timer.) After the minute is up, introduce yourself and share what brought you to the program. Your response will set the tone for the others, so keep your sharing brief and focused. Turn to the person on your right (or left) and say, "Let's go around the group in this direction."

- 2. When everyone has shared, pray this prayer:

Thank you, God, for calling us to this group.
Together we are on a journey
seeking a better understanding
of your Word.
Guide us to see how your Word
sheds light on our path
and brings us closer to you.
Help us be attentive to your presence
in our daily lives and to live out
your call to love one another. Amen.

(This is the same prayer you will pray together at the end of the meeting when group members have their workbooks.)

- 3. Show the video *Praying the Scriptures*. This video introduces Ron DelBene, author of the book and workbook *Alone With God* used in this program. (The video takes 21 minutes of viewing time.)
- 4. Discussion questions to use after viewing the video:
- What is your favorite scripture story?
 - When have you moved from knowing something from “the outside in” to “the inside out?”
 - At one point, Ron talks about “revisiting and living with” scripture. Have you or anyone you know had a similar experience?
- 5. If group members do not already have their workbooks, hand them out now. Make these points:
- The workbook has five weeks of daily exercises. Each week, one story from the New Testament is studied. The daily exercise grows out of a facet of the story. Twenty to thirty minutes are required to do the exercise.
 - Each day’s exercise begins with a prayer wherein you pray for a companion on the way. (Your prayer companion is determined by drawing names at the group meeting.) The prayer is followed by a centering exercise in which you focus on a line from scripture in preparation for your time with God’s Word. The same scripture is prayed each day for a week.

FIRST GROUP MEETING

- Each day's exercise has a section called "Reflecting and Responding" in which you reflect on the reading and respond by doing the activity for the day.
 - The daily exercise is followed by an "Inner Response to God's Word." This is a time to let discoveries and insights "settle in" before using the closing prayer.
 - Additional prayers are included in the back of the workbook. These are to be used as desired.
- 6. Pass out index cards and ask each member of the group to write his or her name on one. Place the cards face down and mix them up. Each person then takes a card. People who get their own name draw again. The name on the card is the person they will pray for in the coming week and is to be written in the space provided in the workbook. (Save the cards so new names can be drawn the following week.)
- 7. Invite members of the group to bring a symbol that has relevance to their spiritual journey and place it on the focus table. During the discussion they will have an opportunity to share their symbol and the meaning it has for them. Be aware that for some people, just bringing the symbol will be all the sharing they care to do. Others may not have a symbol, or if they do, may not want to share in this way.
- 8. End with prayer. Use the same prayer that was prayed at the beginning of the meeting. By revisiting the prayer after the sharing that has occurred, the group will likely find new meaning in it. Ask everyone to turn to this prayer and pray together:

Thank you, God, for calling us to this group.
Together we are companions on a journey
leading to a better understanding
of your Word.
Guide us to see how your Word
sheds light on our path
and brings us closer to you.
Help us as we strive to be attentive to your presence
in our daily lives and to live out
your call to love one another.
Amen.

WEEK ONE: OUR MANY FACES

The story for this week
is that of the good Samaritan.
(Luke 10:30-35)

Week 1, Day 1



This week I am praying for _____.

PRAYER:

I give thanks to you, O God, my Creator. You have called me by name and know both my face and my inmost thoughts. Guide me to a fuller knowledge of myself that I may draw closer to you. Let me feel your presence in my daily life and know that your love is always with me. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Search me, O God, and know my heart.
— Psalm 139:23 (NRSV)

WEEK 1, DAY 1

Let the scripture be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you reach an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. There is power in the spoken word even when the voice is your own and you are the audience. Take your time. If something in the story grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

— Luke 10:30-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

The good Samaritan is a familiar story—so familiar, in fact, that the expression “being a good Samaritan” is widely recognized. If someone is called a good Samaritan, what does this mean to you?

ALONE WITH GOD WORKBOOK

Cite an instance when you felt someone was being a good Samaritan. This can be someone you know or someone you only read or heard about.

This week you are going to be asked to look at the good Samaritan story in more depth than you may have in the past. As you read it today, did any words or phrases stand out or speak to you in a particular way? If so, circle them.

Choose a word, phrase, or image in the story that has special meaning for you and write it here. (For example: *robbers, moved with pity, bandaging wounds.*)

Use what you have written as a reminder of the story.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Yahweh, you search me and know me.
— Psalm 139:1

END WITH PRAYER:

I give you thanks, O God, for this time I have spent in quiet reflection. I look to your Word for a better understanding of who I am and who I am called to be. Guide me as I strive to live according to your call to love others as you have loved me. Amen.

Week 1, Day 2



PRAYER:

I give thanks to you, O God, my Creator. You have called me by name and know both my face and my inmost thoughts. Guide me to a fuller knowledge of myself that I may draw closer to you. Let me feel your presence in my daily life and know that your love is always with me. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Search me, O God, and know my heart.
— Psalm 139:23 (NRSV)

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. As you read the story, think about how you are like two of the characters in the story—one of the robbers and the one who is beaten. Take your time. If something about the story grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

— Luke 10:30-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

God has created us to be wondrously complex. Often in scripture we find stories that reveal the various facets—or faces—of ourselves. Once we accept that we are a person of many facets and are aware of all our faces, we can take steps to reveal the very best that is in us.

For this session and the three that follow, you will be asked to look at various characters in the story. In doing so you are likely to make discoveries about yourself. A young man who gained insight into his own life from the robbers in the story said, "I remember a look I got as a kid, and now I find myself giving others that same look. It says, 'Don't you dare!' As a child I was robbed, and now I rob others."

We also rob ourselves and others when we say such things as "I'm not able to learn that" or "I'm too old" or "Girls can't do that" or "Boys aren't supposed to cry." Other remarks that reveal the robber in us are, "It'll never work" or "You wouldn't want to disappoint me, would you?"

Think of five ways you rob yourself or others.

1. _____

2. _____

WEEK 1, DAY 2

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Do you identify with the person in the story who is beaten? Perhaps like Bill, an attorney in his late thirties, you remember times when you wanted to cry out for help, but felt so beaten down you didn't have the energy. Or you see something of yourself in Sandra, a busy mother of two adolescents, who gets angry when what she really wants is compassionate understanding, but no one seems to care about her.

Write about a way in which you feel you are the one who is being beaten, or a way in which you beat on others.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Yahweh, you search me and know me.
— Psalm 139:1

END WITH PRAYER:

I give you thanks, O God, for this time I have spent in quiet reflection. I look to your Word for a better understanding of who I am and who I am called to be. Guide me as I strive to live according to your call to love others as you have loved me. Amen.

Week 1, Day 3



PRAYER:

I give thanks to you, O God, my Creator. You have called me by name and know both my face and my inmost thoughts. Guide me to a fuller knowledge of myself that I may draw closer to you. Let me feel your presence in my daily life and know that your love is always with me. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Search me, O God, and know my heart.
— Psalm 139:23 (NRSV)

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. As you read the story, think about how you are like two of the characters in the story—the priest and the Levite. If something about the story grabs

WEEK 1, DAY 3

your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

— Luke 10:30-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Again today we look at characters in the story of the good Samaritan to see what they reveal about us. Perhaps we are like the priest when we are aware of abuse and fail to report it to the authorities or when elected officials violate the public trust and we do nothing in protest. Or we may be like the priest when we say, "Keep a stiff upper lip," to a friend who needs a listening ear, or to a needy neighbor say, "Call if I can be of help," instead of suggesting specific things you are willing to do. We may also be reacting like the priest in the story when we put off until tomorrow those things that need doing today.

Do you see something of the priest in yourself? Write about at least one instance in which your failed to reach out to someone in need when you had the opportunity.

Similarly, write about an instance when you did reach out.

We are behaving like the Levite when we step aside from those in need and say, "It'll do them good to work it out themselves; they'll learn that way." Cool and rational, we reason with our head and ignore what our heart is telling us. At times that approach is appropriate, but when applied to all situations it prevents us from acting with the compassion God expects of us.

Write about a time when you wish you had acted more compassionately.

Has there been a time when you disregarded what your head was telling you and did what your heart was telling you? If so, write about it.

Which of the faces of yourself gave you the greatest satisfaction?

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Yahweh, you search me and know me.
— Psalm 139:1

WEEK 1, DAY 3

END WITH PRAYER:

I give you thanks, O God, for this time I have spent in quiet reflection. I look to your Word for a better understanding of who I am and who I am called to be. Guide me as I strive to live according to your call to love others as you have loved me. Amen.

Week 1, Day 4



PRAYER:

I give thanks to you, O God, my Creator. You have called me by name and know both my face and my inmost thoughts. Guide me to a fuller knowledge of myself that I may draw closer to you. Let me feel your presence in my daily life and know that your love is always with me. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Search me, O God, and know my heart.
— Psalm 139:23 (NRSV)

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

You may want to read it silently and then aloud. As you read, think about how you are like two of the characters in the story—the Samaritan and the innkeeper. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

WEEK 1, DAY 4

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

— Luke 10:30-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

The Samaritan in the story has become a hero of mythic proportions, someone willing to do a good deed whatever the cost to himself. But in reality he might have been much like us—wanting to help but hesitant or even fearful. Any traveler living at that time would have been aware of the dangers that lurked along the road. Perhaps the Samaritan asked, "Should I stop, or shouldn't I?" As we know from the story, he decided to help. At times we too take the risk and do what we hope others would do for us.

Write about a time you chose to be a good Samaritan.

Write about a time when someone was a good Samaritan to you.



A grandmother who read the story of the good Samaritan saw herself as the innkeeper. “In my younger days, I took in stray cats and dogs and frogs and gerbils the kids brought home,” she said. “As the children grew up, I took in their stray friends and was never sure how many there’d be for breakfast. Now the kids have kids, and I’m back into stray dogs, cats, and grandchildren.”

In what ways do you wear the face of the innkeeper?

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Yahweh, you search me and know me.
— Psalm 139:1

END WITH PRAYER:

I give you thanks, O God, for this time I have spent in quiet reflection. I look to your Word for a better understanding of who I am and who I am called to be. Guide me as I strive to live according to your call to love others as you have loved me. Amen.

Week 1, Day 5



PRAYER:

I give thanks to you, O God, my Creator. You have called me by name and know both my face and my inmost thoughts. Guide me to a fuller knowledge of myself that I may draw closer to you. Let me feel your presence in my daily life and know that your love is always with me. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Search me, O God, and know my heart.
— Psalm 139:23 (NRSV)

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. As you read it today, think about how you are like the final character in the story—the beast of burden. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

— Luke 10:30-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Many of us have an occasional day when we drag along with a tired step and stooped shoulders. Although we may not complain, it's obvious how burdened we feel. Shirley was such a person. One of her church's most active volunteers, she clearly identified with the beast of burden in the story. "I just let people pile the jobs on me," she said. "No matter how much I have to do I keep saying yes and I figure I'll get everything done somehow." If Shirley were more assertive and took on only as many jobs as she could reasonably handle, she would feel less burdened and find greater satisfaction in giving of herself.

Sandra was a young, single businesswoman, who wrote in her journal how conditions on her job led her to identify with the beast of burden.

The main insight for me this morning was that I tend to see myself as a beast of burden in my present job. I approach everything as if it is another instance of having something laid on me. I suspect that if I change my own attitude about myself I will be able to say no to things that I realize I cannot do. This will help me stop feeling so guilty when I don't get things done on time.

Do you ever feel dumped on or overworked? Then you might identify with the burdened animal. On the other hand, this may be a character with whom you feel no identification. Write about your experiences here.

WEEK 1, DAY 5

I am like the beast of burden when _____

I am not like the beast of burden because _____

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Yahweh, you search me and know me.
— Psalm 139:1

END WITH PRAYER:

I give you thanks, O God, for this time I have spent in quiet reflection. I look to your Word for a better understanding of who I am and who I am called to be. Guide me as I strive to live according to your call to love others as you have loved me. Amen.

Week 1, Day 6



PRAYER:

I give thanks to you, O God, my Creator. You have called me by name and know both my face and my inmost thoughts. Guide me to a fuller knowledge of myself that I may draw closer to you. Let me feel your presence in my daily life and know that your love is always with me. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Search me, O God, and know my heart.
— Psalm 139:23 (NRSV)

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. On this final reading, be alert to additional insights about the characters and how they relate to your own life. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

WEEK 1, DAY 6

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

— Luke 10:30-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Sometimes readers of the good Samaritan story do not identify with any of the characters. They feel as though they are observers, interested in the story but seeing no relationship to themselves and their own lives. If reading the story is like watching a movie that does not involve you, or like looking down at the earth from a cloud, you are reading as an observer. Both in reading God's Word and in life, we can choose to be more than observers. This requires only that we put aside some of our self-protective attitudes and risk identifying with others. In doing so we are likely to feel some of our past hurts and come to understand ourselves more fully. We then have an opportunity to change the way we regard ourselves and act toward others.

Tom was a graduate student who, in reflecting on the good Samaritan story, gained a valuable insight into attitudes and relationships. In this journal entry he writes:

I never permit myself to think of any time when I've been the beaten-on one. That may be why I get so angry when I hear about anyone out of work or people on welfare. My own inability to see myself as one who needs help hinders me from seeing that anyone would ever need help. Yet, down deep, I truly know I've been beaten on. Maybe that's why my girlfriend says that I'm cold and never seem to need anything. That needs to change.

ALONE WITH GOD WORKBOOK

Look back at the exercises you did this week. Reflect on your many faces and the strengths and weaknesses they reveal. What was revealed to you as your strengths?

What was revealed as your weaknesses?

If there are changes in yourself you would like to make, outline the steps you can take to bring them about. Be as specific as possible.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Yahweh, you search me and know me.
— Psalm 139:1

END WITH PRAYER:

I give you thanks, O God, for this time I have spent in quiet reflection. I look to your Word for a better understanding of who I am and who I am called to be. Guide me as I strive to live according to your call to love others as you have loved me. Amen.



PREPARATION FOR THE GROUP MEETING

Look back over your reflections and responses for the past week. Pick out an insight or experience to share. Some people are more comfortable writing out prior to the meeting what they want to share. Use these lines or a separate sheet of paper.

Remember to bring this book to the meeting. You will need it for the closing prayer and may want to refer to something you read or wrote during the week.



SECOND GROUP MEETING

PURPOSE:

To share experiences from the past week and honor one another's encounter with God's Word.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Name tags if people are not yet acquainted
- Bible, candle with a sturdy base, plant or fresh flowers
- Watch or timer
- 3" x 5" index card for each member of the group with his or her name on it (Make new cards if they were not saved from the previous week's meeting.)

PREPARATIONS:

- Arrange the seating so people can easily see one another.
- Create a focus table with the Bible, candle, and plant or flowers. Have the Bible open and the candle lit as people arrive.

PROCEDURE:

If anyone brought a symbol to share, place it on the focus table. (Those who brought symbols will have an opportunity to share them during the discussion. Others may wish to describe something that is symbolic for them.)

- 1. Begin by asking someone to read aloud the scripture you have been praying throughout the week :

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came

SECOND GROUP MEETING

near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

— Luke 10-30-35

➤ 2. Follow with three minutes of silence. (Use a watch or timer.) Ask that the group members reflect on their experiences for the past week:

- a particular learning, insight or rediscovery
- a word, phrase, or image from the scripture that had special meaning
- God's revelation about their lives this week

➤ 3. Initiate group sharing. Invite anyone who has something to share to do so. If no one responds, use these questions to stimulate discussion. It's not necessary to cover all the questions. At some meetings the entire time for discussion may be spent on just one of them. Because different people relate to different questions, it's helpful to read them all and then wait for someone to begin.

- How have you experienced God's presence this week?
- Did you have a particular learning, insight, or rediscovery?
- With which character or image in the scripture story did you most identify?

End the discussion ten minutes before the end of your meeting time. This allows time for picking new prayer companions and the closing ritual. So as not to end the discussion abruptly, give a five-minute warning by saying, "We have five minutes of discussion time left."

➤ 4. Pick new names for prayer companions. Place the 3" x 5" cards face down and mix them up. Each person draws a name; those who get their own draw again. Ask group members to write their new prayer companion's name in their workbooks.

► 5. Begin the closing ritual with a minute of silence. (Use your watch or a timer.) After the silence, ask everyone to look around the group with an awareness of how blessed all of you are to be sharing the journey of the spirit with one another. (Allow a brief moment to look around.) Ask the group to turn to this prayer in their books. Together pray:

Thank you, God, for calling us to this group.

Together we are on a journey
seeking a better understanding
of your Word.

Guide us to see how your Word
sheds light on our path
and brings us closer to you.

Help us be attentive to your presence
in our daily lives and to live out
your call to love one another.

Amen.

WEEK TWO: OVERCOMING ANXIETY

The story for this week is that of the birds
of the air and the flowers of the field.
(Matthew 6:25-34)

Week 2, Day 1



This week I am praying for _____.

PRAYER:

O God of all creation, I believe that I am guided by your loving care. There are times, though, when I feel anxious and afraid. I worry about today and fear what tomorrow may bring. Help me overcome my anxieties. Grant me the grace to seek your kingdom first and to know that all else will come to me as needed. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Yahweh guards you, shades you.
— Psalm 121:5

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. There is power in the spoken word even when the voice is your own and you are the audience. Take your time. If something in the story grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

[And Jesus said,] "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

— Matthew 6:25-34



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

In this reading from the Gospel of Matthew we are told not to worry—that God, who gives life, will provide the means for sustaining it. This is a familiar

WEEK 2, DAY 1

passage and one you have probably given some thought to prior to this reading. What is your attitude toward Jesus' admonition not to be anxious about today or worried about tomorrow?

This week you are going to look at the story in more depth than you may have in the past. As you read it today, did any words or phrases stand out or speak to you in a particular way? If so, circle them.

Choose a word, phrase, or image in the story that has special meaning for you and write it here.

Use what you have written as a reminder of the story.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

The LORD watches over the sojourners.
— Psalm 146:9 (RSV)

END WITH PRAYER:

Open my eyes, O God, to the wonder of each new day and the beauty of the world you created. Guide me to live my life with purpose and meaning. Grant me the grace to see that my greatest need is to grow in your Spirit. When I lose sight of what is most important on this journey through life, lead me back to a closer walk with you. Amen.

Week 2, Day 2



PRAYER:

O God of all creation, I believe that I am guided by your loving care. There are times, though, when I feel anxious and afraid. I worry about today and fear what tomorrow may bring. Help me overcome my anxieties. Grant me the grace to seek your kingdom first and to know that all else will come to me as needed. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Yahweh guards you, shades you.
— Psalm 121:5

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. Take your time. If something in the story grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

[And Jesus said,] “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

— Matthew 6:25-34



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

The reading from the Gospel of Matthew is part of a larger discourse, or teaching, beginning with the beatitudes in Chapter 5. In the passage we are considering this week, Jesus is talking to his followers about detachment from possessions. Some people find his words unsettling and even threatening. But what is Jesus really saying here? Is he telling us we don’t have to take responsibility for meeting our needs? Is he saying that planning for the future is a lack of trust in God’s providence?

I don’t think so.

What Jesus wants us to understand is that we should not get so caught up in the acquisition of material goods that we lose sight of what is truly important. We should not be so intent on planning for the future that we fail to be present to the moment. What matters most is an awareness of our dependence

on God. When we make God central to our lives and do what needs doing today, tomorrow will take care of itself.

To make his point, Jesus uses the birds of air and the flowers of the field as examples. These were images familiar to his listeners and examples they would understand. If Jesus were speaking to a contemporary audience, he might tell us to put first things first or to get our priorities straight.

Think about your life and your priorities. List your top three priorities in order of their importance. For each priority, state one action you plan to take as evidence of its significance to you. Be specific.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

The LORD watches over the sojourners.
— Psalm 146:9 (RSV)

WEEK 2, DAY 2

END WITH PRAYER:

Open my eyes, O God, to the wonder of each new day and the beauty of the world you created. Guide me to live my life with purpose and meaning. Grant me the grace to see that my greatest need is to grow in your Spirit. When I lose sight of what is most important on this journey through life, lead me back to a closer walk with you. Amen.

Week 2, Day 3



PRAYER:

O God of all creation, I believe that I am guided by your loving care. There are times, though, when I feel anxious and afraid. I worry about today and fear what tomorrow may bring. Help me overcome my anxieties. Grant me the grace to seek your kingdom first and to know that all else will come to me as needed. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Yahweh guards you, shades you.
— Psalm 121:5

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. Take your time. When something about the story strikes you, stop and reflect on it. Be open to the Word and allow God's Spirit to lead your thoughts.

WEEK 2, DAY 3

[And Jesus said,] “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

— Matthew 6:25-34



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

It has been said that worry is the interest we pay on trouble before it comes due. Sometime our anxieties are vague and not easily identified. But until a concern is identified, we can’t take steps to resolve it. Devote this time to examining your life to better understand what it is you are anxious about.

In the reading, Jesus mentioned five concerns:

EATING DRINKING THE BODY CLOTHING TOMORROW

Which do you worry about the most? Print “1” over it.

Which do you worry about the least? Print “5” over it.

Rank the remaining 2, 3, or 4 depending upon your degree of anxiousness .

Why do you think you ranked them as you did? Does it have to do with age? Circumstances? Family background? Were your concerns different five years ago? If so, why have they changed?



INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

The LORD watches over the sojourners.
— Psalm 146:9 (RSV)

END WITH PRAYER:

Open my eyes, O God, to the wonder of each new day and the beauty of the world you created. Guide me to live my life with purpose and meaning. Grant me the grace to see that my greatest need is to grow in your Spirit. When I lose sight of what is most important on this journey through life, lead me back to a closer walk with you. Amen.

Week 2, Day 4



PRAYER:

O God of all creation, I believe that I am guided by your loving care. There are times, though, when I feel anxious and afraid. I worry about today and fear what tomorrow may bring. Help me overcome my anxieties. Grant me the grace to seek your kingdom first and to know that all else will come to me as needed. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Yahweh guards you, shades you.
— Psalm 121:5

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read silently or aloud. If something about the story strikes you, stop and reflect on it. Be open to the Word and allow God's Spirit to lead your thoughts.

[And Jesus said,] “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

— Matthew 6:25-34



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Many people think that money is the answer to virtually all problems. Of course an adequate income is important, but beyond a certain amount, money frequently creates more problems than it solves. Money leads to accumulating, often to the extent that we never have enough. Most of us are accumulators to some degree. We have more shoes than we will ever need, or a closet full of clothes we do not wear, or a house full of possessions we think we cannot live without. We are driven to buy, to own, to accumulate. One woman was so in love with possessions that she actually asked to be buried in her favorite car (and was)!

Jesus teaches that those who walk in the Spirit do not seek an abundance of material goods. Because we have another home and are but sojourners on this earth, we need only enough for our journey. By simplifying our lives, we

WEEK 2, DAY 4

are better able to live more fully in the Spirit; better able to see what is most important in life and put our energies there.

How can you simplify your life? Maybe it's something as practical as deciding on two or three charities among the dozens of requests you get and giving to those regularly, or going through your closet and giving away clothing that is still useful but no longer worn. Maybe simplifying your life means changing your diet so you are eating simpler but more nutritious meals, or cutting out a lot of social activity that keeps you busy but unfulfilled.

Think of ways you can simplify your life. Be specific.

Workplace:

Home/Family:

Spiritual Life:

Other:

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

The LORD watches over the sojourners.
— Psalm 146:9 (RSV)

END WITH PRAYER:

Open my eyes, O God, to the wonder of each new day and the beauty of the world you created. Guide me to live my life with purpose and meaning. Grant me the grace to see that my greatest need is to grow in your Spirit. When I lose sight of what is most important on this journey through life, lead me back to a closer walk with you. Amen.

Week 2, Day 5



PRAYER:

O God of all creation, I believe that I am guided by your loving care. There are times, though, when I feel anxious and afraid. I worry about today and fear what tomorrow may bring. Help me overcome my anxieties. Grant me the grace to seek your kingdom first and to know that all else will come to me as needed. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Yahweh guards you, shades you.
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Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read silently or aloud. If something about the story strikes you, stop and reflect on it. Be open to the Word and allow God's Spirit to lead your thoughts.

[And Jesus said,] “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

— Matthew 6:25-34



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Following are accounts of two people who reflected on how this week’s scripture reading applied to their lives. Colleen, mother of a newborn, made this journal entry:

I could identify so very well with this story. Ever since I can remember, I’ve been anxious about my appearance. I always worried about being too fat and spent way too much on clothes I didn’t even wear. Then after I had the baby, I felt that he was getting all the attention and no one seemed to notice me anymore.

I realize now I’ll never have the looks of a model. I need to accept myself the way I am, but there are some things I can do. I need to exercise more and change my eating habits. I must try to remember to ask God to free me from old ways of thinking.

WEEK 2, DAY 5

Unlike Colleen, Marilyn did not have a specific idea about how she might change her life. Instead, she reconsidered her self-worth. Showing me a bright-colored sketch of a rose, she said, “I guess because I’m a painter I see things that a lot of people don’t. I love to do flowers, and I really did identify with Jesus’ statement that even Solomon in his glory was not like one of these. Just to sit and look at the intricate designs in a flower is enough to awe me. And I wonder, *Am I worth even more than that flower?*”

Look back at what you wrote in “Reflecting and Responding” on Day 2, Day 3, and Day 4 of this week. What is God helping you see about yourself? What steps can you take to be free of anxiety? What will make you feel more at peace with your life? Express your insights here in words or as a drawing here or on a separate sheet of paper.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

The LORD watches over the sojourners.
— Psalm 146:9 (RSV)

END WITH PRAYER:

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Week 2, Day 6



PRAYER:

O God of all creation, I believe that I am guided by your loving care. There are times, though, when I feel anxious and afraid. I worry about today and fear what tomorrow may bring. Help me overcome my anxieties. Grant me the grace to seek your kingdom first and to know that all else will come to me as needed. I ask this both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Yahweh guards you, shades you.
— Psalm 121:5

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read silently or aloud. If something about the story strikes you, stop and reflect on it. Be open to the Word and allow God's Spirit to lead your thoughts.

WEEK 2, DAY 6

[And Jesus said,] Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

— Matthew 6:25-34



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

You have been reading this same story throughout the week. Did particular words or phrases stand out for you as you read it today? If so, circle them.

Refer back to “Reflecting and Responding” on Day 1. What words or phrases did you circle? Are they different from the ones you circled today?

Again referring to Day 1, you were asked to respond to this question: What is your attitude toward Jesus’ admonition not to be anxious about today or worried about tomorrow? Now that you have reflected on the story this past week, what is your response to the admonition?

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

The LORD watches over the sojourners.
— Psalm 146:9 (RSV)

END WITH PRAYER:

Open my eyes, O God, to the wonder of each each new day and the beauty of the world you created. Guide me to live my life with purpose and meaning. Grant me the grace to see that my greatest need is to grow in your Spirit. When I lose sight of what is most important on this journey through life, lead me back to a closer walk with you. Amen.



PREPARATION FOR THE GROUP MEETING

Look back over your reflections and responses for the past week. Pick out an insight or experience to share. Some people are more comfortable writing out prior to the meeting what they want to share. Use these lines or a separate sheet of paper.

Remember to bring this book to the meeting. You will need it for the closing prayer and may want to refer to something you read or wrote during the week.

THIRD GROUP MEETING

PURPOSE:

To share experiences for the past week and honor one another's encounter with God's Word.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bible, candle with a sturdy base, plant or fresh flowers
- Watch or timer
- 3" x 5" index card for each member of the group with his or her name on it

PREPARATIONS:

- Arrange the seating so people can easily see one another.
- Create a focus table with the Bible, candle, and plant or flowers. Have the Bible open and the candle lit as people arrive.

PROCEDURE:

If anyone brought a symbol to share, place it on the focus table. (Those who brought symbols will have an opportunity to share them during the discussion. Others may wish to describe something that is symbolic for them.)

- 1. Begin by asking someone to read the scripture you have been praying throughout the week:

[And Jesus said,] Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do

you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

— Matthew 6:25-34

► 2. Follow with three minutes of silence. (Use a watch or timer.) Ask that the group members reflect on their experiences during the week:

- a particular learning, insight or rediscovery
- a word, phrase, or image from the scripture with which they especially identified
- God's revelation about their lives this week

► 3. Initiate group sharing. Invite anyone who has something to share to do so. If no one responds, use these questions to stimulate discussion. It is not necessary to cover all the questions. Because different people relate to different questions, it's helpful to read them all and then wait for someone to respond. At some meetings the entire time for discussion may be spent on just one question.

- How have you experienced God's presence this week?
- Did you have a particular learning, insight, or rediscovery?
- With what image in the scripture did you most identify?

End the discussion ten minutes before the end of your meeting. This allows time for picking new prayer companions and the closing ritual. So as not to end the discussion abruptly, give a five-minute warning by saying, "We have five minutes of discussion time left."

THIRD GROUP MEETING

- 4. Pick new names for prayer companions. Place the 3" x 5" cards face down and mix them up. Each person draws a name; those who get their own draw again. Ask group members to write their new prayer companion's name in their workbooks.

- 5. Begin the closing ritual with a minute of silence. (Use your watch or a timer.) After the silence, ask everyone to look around the group with an awareness of how blessed all of you are to be sharing the journey of the spirit with one another. (Allow a brief moment to look around.) Ask the group to turn to this prayer in their books. Together pray:

Thank you, God, for calling us to this group.

Together we are on a journey
seeking a better understanding
of your Word.

Guide us to see how your Word
sheds light on our path
and brings us closer to you.

Help us be attentive to your presence
in our daily lives and to live out
your call to love one another.

Amen.

WEEK THREE: SEEKING FORGIVENESS

The story for this week
is that of the woman caught in adultery.
(John 8:2-11)

Week 3, Day 1



This week I am praying for _____.

PRAYER:

Almighty God, grant me the insight to see myself clearly. Help me recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses. When I fail to live according to your Word, guide me to seek your forgiveness. Lead me to be open before you so that I may feel the peace that comes from you alone. Forgive whatever wrongs I have committed, and grant me the generosity of spirit to forgive myself as well. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

WEEK 3, DAY 1

Hear my prayer, O God.
— Psalm 55:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. There is power in the spoken word even when the voice is your own and you are the audience. Take your time. If something in the story grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

— John 8:2-11



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

The woman caught in adultery is a familiar scripture story. As you understand it now, what is the central message for you?

This week you are going to look at the story in more depth than you may have in the past. As you read it today, did any words or phrases stand out or speak to you in a particular way? If so, circle them.

Choose a word, phrase, or image in the story that has special meaning for you and write it here.

Use what you have written as a reminder of the story.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Have mercy on me, God, have mercy.
— Psalm 57:1

END WITH PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for your gift of forgiveness. You know the dark urges of the human heart and love your children nonetheless. Strengthen me that I may make choices according to your Word. Guide me to live a good and honorable life. When I fail to be the person I am called to be, let me find peace by seeking your forgiveness. Amen.

Week 3, Day 2



PRAYER:

Almighty God, grant me the insight to see myself clearly. Help me recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses. When I fail to live according to your Word, guide me to seek your forgiveness. Lead me to be open before you so that I may feel the peace that comes from you alone. Forgive whatever wrongs I have committed, and grant me the generosity of spirit to forgive myself as well. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Hear my prayer, O God.
— Psalm 55:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story three times. You may want to read it silently or aloud. Each time, read from a different perspective.

First Reading: Imagine the story from the perspective of Jesus; try to sense his feelings and thoughts.

Second Reading: Imagine the story from the perspective of the Pharisees; try to sense their feelings and thoughts.

Third Reading: Imagine the story from the perspective of the woman caught in adultery; try to sense her feelings and thoughts.

After each reading—or in the midst of the reading—write down your thoughts and feelings from each perspective. (Space is provided for this in “Reflecting and Responding.”)

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

— John 8:2-11



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Thoughts and feelings as I read from the perspective of Jesus:

WEEK 3, DAY 2

Thoughts and feelings as I read from the perspective of the Pharisees:

Thoughts and feelings as I read from the perspective of the woman:

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Have mercy on me, God, have mercy.
— Psalm 57:1

END WITH PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for your gift of forgiveness. You know the dark urges of the human heart and love your children nonetheless. Strengthen me that I may make choices according to your Word. Guide me to live a good and honorable life. When I fail to be the person I am called to be, let me find peace by seeking your forgiveness. Amen.

Week 3, Day 3



PRAYER:

Almighty God, grant me the insight to see myself clearly. Help me recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses. When I fail to live according to your Word, guide me to seek your forgiveness. Lead me to be open before you so that I may feel the peace that comes from you alone. Forgive whatever wrongs I have committed, and grant me the generosity of spirit to forgive myself as well. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Hear my prayer, O God.
— Psalm 55:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

As you read the scripture today, be aware of how the mood changes as the story develops. The story begins with a mood of anticipation that turns to one of hostility, then to a mood of tenseness. When only Jesus and the accused

woman remain, the mood is hopeful but also tinged with fear. By the story's end there seems to prevail a mood of peace and gratitude.

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

— John 8:2-11



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Judging others is a prominent theme in the story about the woman caught in adultery. Jesus is telling us to look not at the sins of others, but rather to examine our own actions and look into our own hearts. By looking first at our own failings, we may be less likely to judge those of others.

When am I most likely to judgmental?

Have I ever condemned someone for an action I considered sinful? Explain.

When have I felt God turning to me and saying that I am forgiven and to go and sin no more?

Through forgiveness each of us can leave our old life behind and can begin anew, dedicated to living in a way that brings out the best of who we are.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Have mercy on me, God, have mercy.
— Psalm 57:1

END WITH PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for your gift of forgiveness. You know the dark urges of the human heart and love your children nonetheless. Strengthen me that I may make choices according to your Word. Guide me to live a good and honorable life. When I fail to be the person I am called to be, let me find peace by seeking your forgiveness. Amen.

Week 3, Day 4



PRAYER:

Almighty God, grant me the insight to see myself clearly. Help me recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses. When I fail to live according to your Word, guide me to seek your forgiveness. Lead me to be open before you so that I may feel the peace that comes from you alone. Forgive whatever wrongs I have committed, and grant me the generosity of spirit to forgive myself as well. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Hear my prayer, O God.
— Psalm 55:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

As you read the story today, be aware of sin and the response to it.

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

— John 8:2-11



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

The mention of sin calls forth a variety of responses. Increasingly people are distressed by their inability to determine what is and what is not sin. What one generation views as sinful, another may consider natural and normal. Not only is this distressing to individuals, but it can split entire congregations into angry camps.

To gain perspective on how views about sin differ, it is helpful to look at the word itself. In Greek the word sin is *hamartia*, which means "missing the mark."

So what is the mark? As Christians, what are we aiming for?

To some extent the answer depends upon our age. A child's aim will be different from an adult's. Young children quickly learn that one day we hope to be with God. That then becomes the mark to aim for. Unfortunately the child's concept of God may be of an ever-vigilant police officer in the sky who demands strict obedience. Not surprisingly the child with this image of God

WEEK 3, DAY 4

finds it difficult to distinguish between God's rules and those of Mom and Dad. Some parents like it that way and use God to achieve good discipline. When this is the case, the child grows up viewing God as stern and punishing rather than loving and approachable.

As we grow older and come to understand more about the love of our Creator, we discover that God sent Jesus to walk with us and touch our lives. Through Jesus we are called to a living relationship with God. This adds another dimension to our spiritual lives. Along with the childhood image and the ten commandments, we are introduced to the loving justice revealed through Jesus. What we saw as sin or missing the mark must now be more broadly defined. Many people prefer to continue living the simple right/wrong, black/white, police officer image because the rules are clear-cut and can be judged rather easily. Adding the dimension of Jesus' loving justice and the call to follow his example often leads to dilemmas that involve making moral decisions without the help of a clearly defined law or rule.

Look back at your life and recall what your understanding of sin was at various times.

Young child

Adolescent

Young adult

Present

Has your concept of missing the mark changed?

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Have mercy on me, God, have mercy.
— Psalm 57:1

END WITH PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for your gift of forgiveness. You know the dark urges of the human heart and love your children nonetheless. Strengthen me that I may make choices according to your Word. Guide me to live a good and honorable life. When I fail to be the person I am called to be, let me find peace by seeking your forgiveness. Amen.

Week 3, Day 5



PRAYER:

Almighty God, grant me the insight to see myself clearly. Help me recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses. When I fail to live according to your Word, guide me to seek your forgiveness. Lead me to be open before you so that I may feel the peace that comes from you alone. Forgive whatever wrongs I have committed, and grant me the generosity of spirit to forgive myself as well. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Hear my prayer, O God.
— Psalm 55:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

— John 8:2-11



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Although people’s understanding of sin may differ, each of us can look within and discover ways we have failed to live up to being our best selves—ways in which we have missed the mark. In that respect we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of who God called us to be.

The activity for today, “Missing the Mark,” is a life review that is intended to help you discover when and in what ways you have missed the mark.

- On a separate sheet of paper, make a list of ways in which you have not lived up to your potential as a child of God.
- Begin with the most recent time and work backward.
- Write the date, event, and the people involved if that pertains. This is for your eyes only, but to guard your privacy you may want to use abbreviations or fictitious names.

WEEK 3, DAY 5

Do not dwell on any of the events; simply accept them as part of your spiritual history. If you find this exercise painful, take heart from the woman in the story. When she stood before Jesus, he accepted her as she was. God does the same with us. When we want to hide our past rather than confront it, we need to be reminded that there is never a time when God does not love us. Never a time—no matter what we may have done—when Jesus is not willing to say, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Make your life review as complete as possible. You may want to begin it now and come back to it from time to time.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Have mercy on me, God, have mercy.
— Psalm 57:1

END WITH PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for your gift of forgiveness. You know the dark urges of the human heart and love your children nonetheless. Strengthen me that I may make choices according to your Word. Guide me to live a good and honorable life. When I fail to be the person I am called to be, let me find peace by seeking your forgiveness. Amen.

Week 3, Day 6



PRAYER:

Almighty God, grant me the insight to see myself clearly. Help me recognize both my strengths and my weaknesses. When I fail to live according to your Word, guide me to seek your forgiveness. Lead me to be open before you so that I may know the peace that comes from you alone. Forgive whatever wrongs I have committed, and grant me the generosity of spirit to forgive myself as well. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

Hear my prayer, O God.
— Psalm 55:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

As you read the story today imagine yourself standing before Jesus like the woman brought before him by the Pharisees. Be open to allowing God's Spirit to lead your thoughts.

WEEK 3, DAY 6

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

— John 8:2-11



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Refer to the "Missing the Mark" activity you did yesterday. What you have written reflects a part of you. No matter how foolish or mean-spirited or vile you perceive your actions to have been, acknowledge and embrace them as your own. Then bring them to Jesus just as the woman in the story was brought before him.

- Read silently or aloud what you have written.
- Ask God's forgiveness and know that it is granted.
- Burn your list or take some other symbolic action to indicate that past instances of missing the mark are behind you and you are starting anew.

Write on the lines below or sketch on a separate piece of paper how you feel about missing the mark over the years. Has there been a pattern to your actions?

Is there an area of your life in which you miss the mark again and again? If so, write or sketch what it is and what you can do to change. Be specific.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Have mercy on me, God, have mercy.
— Psalm 57:1

END WITH PRAYER:

Thank you, God, for your gift of forgiveness. You know the dark urges of the human heart and love your children nonetheless. Strengthen me that I may make choices according to your Word. Guide me to live a good and honorable life. When I fail to be the person I am called to be, let me find peace by seeking your forgiveness. Amen.



WEEK 3, DAY 6

PREPARATION FOR THE GROUP MEETING

Look back over your reflections and responses for the past week. Pick out an insight or experience to share. Some people are more comfortable writing out prior to the meeting what they want to share. Use these lines or a separate sheet of paper.

Remember to bring this book to the meeting. You will need it for the closing prayer and may want to refer to something you read or wrote during the week.

FOURTH GROUP MEETING

PURPOSE:

To share experiences for the past week and honor one another's encounter with God's Word.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bible, candle with a sturdy base, plant or fresh flowers
- Watch or timer
- 3" x 5" index card for each member of the group with his or her name on it

PREPARATIONS:

- Arrange the seating so people can easily see one another.
- Create a focus table with the Bible, candle, and plant or flowers. Have the Bible open and the candle lit as people arrive.

PROCEDURE:

If anyone brought a symbol to share, place it on the focus table. (Those who brought symbols will have an opportunity to share them during the discussion. Others may wish to describe something that is symbolic for them.)

- 1. Begin by asking someone to read the scripture you have been praying throughout the week:

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

FOURTH GROUP MEETING

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

— John 8:2-11

➤ 2. Follow with three minutes of silence. (Use a watch or timer.) Ask that the group members reflect on their experiences during the week:

- a particular learning, insight or rediscovery
- a word, phrase or image with which they especially identified
- God's revelation about their lives this week

➤ 3. Initiate group sharing. Invite anyone who has something to share to do so. If no one responds, use these questions to stimulate discussion. It's not necessary to cover all the questions. Because different people relate to different questions, it's helpful to read them all and then wait for someone to respond. At some meetings the entire time for discussion may be spent on just one question.

- How have you experienced God's presence this week?
- Did you have a particular learning, insight or rediscovery?
- With which character or image in the scripture for this week did you most identify?

End the discussion ten minutes before the end of your meeting. This allows time for picking new prayer companions and the closing ritual. So as not to end the discussion abruptly, give a five-minute warning by saying, "We have five minutes of discussion time left."

➤ 4. Pick new names for prayer companions. Place the 3" x 5" cards face down and mix them up. Each person draws a name; those who get their own

draw again. Ask group members to write their new prayer companion's name in their workbooks.

► 5. Begin the closing ritual with a minute of silence. (Use your watch or a timer.) After the silence, ask everyone to look around the group with an awareness of how blessed all of you are to be sharing the journey of the spirit with one another. (Allow a brief moment to look around.) Ask the group to turn to this prayer in their books. Together pray:

Thank you, God, for calling us to this group.
Together we are on a journey
seeking a better understanding
of your Word.
Guide us to see how your Word
sheds light on our path
and brings us closer to you.
Help us be attentive to your presence
in our daily lives and to live out
your call to love one another.
Amen.

WEEK FOUR: FORGIVING OTHERS

The story this week is that of
the settlement of accounts.
(Matthew 18:23-25)

Week 4, Day 1



This week I am praying for _____.

PRAYER:

O God, I know that you have forgiven me many times over. Through your forgiveness I feel your abiding love. Grant me the grace to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Guide me as I strive to both forgive and forget. Strengthen me as I struggle to let go of old hurts and be free of old grudges. In my forgiveness of others, may the light of your love shine through me. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

My soul is thirsting for God.
— Psalm 42:2

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. There is power in the spoken word even when the voice is your own and you are the audience. Take your time. If something in the story grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he couldn't pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

— Matthew 18:23-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Perhaps you are already familiar with the parable of the unforgiving servant. As you read it now, what is the central message for you?

This week you are going to look at the story in more depth than you may have in the past. As you read it today, did any words or phrases stand out or speak to you in a particular way? If so, circle them.

Choose a word, phrase, or image in the story that has special meaning for you and write it here.

Use what you have written as a reminder of the story.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Truly God has listened.
— Psalm 66:19

END WITH PRAYER:

I know that you are always with me, God. Keep me mindful of your presence, and grant me the grace to seek your guidance. Lead me to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Then may I know the peace of mind and heart that comes from forgiving and from being forgiven. This I ask that I might grow in the fullness of your love. Amen.

Week 4, Day 2



PRAYER:

O God, I know that you have forgiven me many times over. Through your forgiveness I feel your abiding love. Grant me the grace to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Guide me as I strive to both forgive and forget. Strengthen me as I struggle to let go of old hurts and be free of old grudges. In my forgiveness of others, may the light of your love shine through me. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

My soul is thirsting for God.
— Psalm 42:2

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. As you read today, focus on the slave's experience of being fearful, of

begging for forgiveness, and of being forgiven. Take your time. If something in the story grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he couldn't pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

— Matthew 18:23-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Anyone who has ever been heavily in debt can identify with the panic the slave feels when the king calls for an immediate settling of accounts. The slave, his wife, children, and all their possessions are to be sold as payment on the debt. There is no time to think, no time to borrow. The day of reckoning is at hand. In desperation the slave falls to his knees and pleads for an extension of time. If the story were set in contemporary times and the bank about to foreclose on

everything we owned—home, car, business, farm—we might react in much the same way.

The slave's desperate plea brings forth the kind of compassionate response that was as unusual in biblical times as in our own day. Occasionally (usually during the Christmas season) we read a newspaper account about someone forgiving or paying off the debt of another. Such a generous gesture becomes news only because it is so out of the ordinary.

We can imagine how the slave must have felt upon hearing the king's response to his plea. The weight of ruin lifted from his shoulders, he rises from his knees and goes on his way. The story's happy ending is remindful of the old-time melodrama in which the heroine tied to the railroad tracks is rescued at the last second.

Have you had an experience that helps you relate to the thoughts and feelings of the slave as he pleads for more time in which to repay his debt? Although the circumstances will be vastly different from those in the story, write about being forgiven at various stages of your life.

Childhood

Adolescence

Adulthood

My most recent experience of being forgiven

WEEK 4, DAY 2

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

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Truly God has listened.
— Psalm 66:19

END WITH PRAYER:

I know that you are always with me, God. Keep me mindful of your presence, and grant me the grace to seek your guidance. Lead me to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Then may I know the peace of mind and heart that comes from forgiving and from being forgiven. This I ask that I might grow in the fullness of your love. Amen.

Week 4, Day 3



PRAYER:

O God, I know that you have forgiven me many times over. Through your forgiveness I feel your abiding love. Grant me the grace to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Guide me as I strive both to forgive and forget. Strengthen me as I struggle to let go of old hurts and be free of old grudges. In my forgiveness of others, may the light of your love shine through me. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

My soul is thirsting for God.
— Psalm 42:2

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. Today focus on the slave's response to being forgiven. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

WEEK 4, DAY 3

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he couldn't pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

— Matthew 18:23-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

After the slave is spared from ruin by the king's forgiveness, he appears not to have learned the lesson his experience was meant to teach. Consumed with self-interest, he fails to have mercy on fellow slaves who are in debt to him.

What about us? Do we experience forgiveness and are we, in turn, forgiving? Or are we like the slave who refuses to bestow on another the mercy and forgiveness that was shown to him?

Think for a moment about the prayer that Jesus taught us. How many times have we prayed "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us"? When we say those words, do we truly mean them? Do we

want God's forgiveness on the condition that we, in turn, be forgiving to others? Or do we expect forgiveness to be a one way street—we are forgiven without having to forgive?

Mike was a young man doing time for a felony when he confronted issues about forgiveness while studying scripture. "I was struck that Jesus seemed to say so clearly to me that I've been forgiven more than I can ever forgive someone else," he said. "For a long time I didn't think I could ever be forgiven by God. But one day it connected. I could be forgiven, but I also needed to forgive. Right then and there I made a list of people I needed to forgive and one by one started doing it."

Not all of us are so forthright in our relationships. One such person was Sandra, a nurse in her forties. "When I owe something to someone I generally send it by mail," she said. "There's something about not wanting to see the person face to face. And then I usually don't even like sending a letter with the payment. I try to make it as impersonal as possible. And I've noticed that the person to whom I'm in debt never mentions it either."

We each have our own way of dealing with owing and repaying; with forgiving and with being forgiven. Look at your life to determine how you deal with forgiveness, both seeking and granting it.

Is there someone whose forgiveness you would like to have? What steps can you take so that can happen?

Like Mike, have you ever come to the realization that Jesus is speaking directly to you about forgiveness? Recall the circumstance.

WEEK 4, DAY 3

Like Sandra, do you try to avoid those to whom you are in debt? Or those to whom you owe a debt of forgiveness? If yes, what steps can you take to remedy the situation? Be specific.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Truly God has listened.
— Psalm 66:19

END WITH PRAYER:

I know that you are always with me, God. Keep me mindful of your presence, and grant me the grace to seek your guidance. Lead me to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Then may I know the peace of mind and heart that comes from forgiving and from being forgiven. This I ask that I might grow in the fullness of your love. Amen.

Week 4, Day 4



PRAYER:

O God, I know that you have forgiven me many times over. Through your forgiveness I feel your abiding love. Grant me the grace to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Guide me as I strive both to forgive and forget. Strengthen me as I struggle to let go of old hurts and be free of old grudges. In my forgiveness of others, may the light of your love shine through me. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

My soul is thirsting for God.
— Psalm 42:2

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. As you read today, focus on the slave's action toward those who owe him money. Be open to allowing God's Spirit to lead your thoughts.

WEEK 4, DAY 4

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he couldn't pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

— Matthew 18:23-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Today you are asked to systematically review your life and identify hurtful relationships that can best be healed through your forgiveness.

- Use the space provided or a separate sheet of paper.
- Pray the Lord's Prayer
- List people who have harmed you. (Betrayed a confidence, failed to repay a debt, spread a rumor, used physical violence or one of the many other ways we can be hurt by someone.) Begin in the present and work back. Note the incident without going into detail. You may want to use initials only.

When you have finished, repeat the Lord's Prayer. Add to the list as you feel the need to do so.

People who have hurt me in word and/or deed:

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Truly God has listened.
— Psalm 66:19

END WITH PRAYER:

I know that you are always with me, God. Keep me mindful of your presence, and grant me the grace to seek your guidance. Lead me to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Then may I know the peace of mind and heart that comes from forgiving and from being forgiven. This I ask that I might grow in the fullness of your love. Amen.

Week 4, Day 5



PRAYER:

O God, I know that you have forgiven me many times over. Through your forgiveness I feel your abiding love. Grant me the grace to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Guide me as I strive both to forgive and forget. Strengthen me as I struggle to let go of old hurts and be free of old grudges. In my forgiveness of others, may the light of your love shine through me. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

My soul is thirsting for God.
— Psalm 42:2

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. As you read, focus on the slave's action toward those who owe him money. Pause and reflect when something in particular speaks to you. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he couldn't pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

— Matthew 18:23-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Refer to the list you made yesterday. One by one try to forgive the people on your list. Imagine that the person is with you, and say, "(name), I forgive you." Then pray for that person in your own words or use this prayer:

God, you have forgiven me and you love me as I am. Release the hurt and anger I have toward (name). I seek only good for (name) and ask that you bless our relationship. Let the bond between us be strengthened by forgiveness and understanding. Amen.

WEEK 4, DAY 5

Continue down your list. There may be people on it you are not ready to forgive. That is all right. Do what you can now and ask God to help you overcome whatever is keeping you from granting forgiveness. Even if you are able to forgive only one person today, you have begun to forgive others their trespasses as God has forgiven yours. When you have finished, pray the Lord's Prayer.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Truly God has listened.
— Psalm 66:19

END WITH PRAYER:

I know that you are always with me, God. Keep me mindful of your presence, and grant me the grace to seek your guidance. Lead me to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Then may I know the peace of mind and heart that comes from forgiving and from being forgiven. This I ask that I might grow in the fullness of your love. Amen.

Week 4, Day 6



PRAYER:

O God, I know that you have forgiven me many times over. Through your forgiveness I feel your abiding love. Grant me the grace to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Guide me as I strive to both forgive and forget. Strengthen me as I struggle to let go of old hurts and be free of old grudges. In my forgiveness of others, may the light of your love shine through me. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

My soul is thirsting for God.
— Psalm 42:2

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. As you read, let God's Spirit lead you to an ever-deeper understanding of forgiveness and how it relates to your own life.

WEEK 4, DAY 6

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he couldn't pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

— Matthew 18:23-35



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Throughout scripture we are asked to forgive, and nowhere does it say that forgiving is going to be easy. Joan, a widow in her sixties, made this journal entry about her efforts to forgive:

After making my list of people who had done something against me, I was aware that I was relieved to have it out on paper. Even though some names were painful to remember and I had forgiven them long ago, I discovered there was still hurt or some anger there.

So I asked the Lord to release me from all that was holding me back. I found it interesting that some of the people had died already, and yet when I asked their forgiveness it was like they were right in front of me.

I didn't make it through my list today, but I didn't feel like I had to either. I know that I've gotten names out into the open, and now I can be freer than ever before.

Reflect on your experience with the forgiveness exercise on Week 4, Day 5. Then respond to the following questions. If you feel tearful in the course of doing this exercise, allow yourself to cry. Let what you write help free you from the past so that you can move ahead with an untroubled mind and an open heart. Now it is your turn to write.

- Was forgiving difficult?
- How did your feelings change as you went on?
- What prevented you from forgiving before?

Consider writing a letter to someone from whom you have been estranged but now feel able to contact in a spirit of forgiveness and love.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move

WEEK 4, DAY 6

their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Truly God has listened.
— Psalm 66:19

END WITH PRAYER:

I know that you are always with me, God. Keep me mindful of your presence, and grant me the grace to seek your guidance. Lead me to forgive others as you have forgiven me. Then may I know the peace of mind and heart that comes from forgiving and from being forgiven. This I ask that I might grow in the fullness of your love. Amen.



PREPARATION FOR THE GROUP MEETING

Look back over your reflections and responses for the past week. Choose an insight or experience to share. Some people are more comfortable writing out prior to the meeting what they want to share. Use these lines or a separate sheet of paper.

Remember to bring this book to the meeting. You will need it for the closing prayer and may want to refer to something you read or wrote during the week.

FIFTH GROUP MEETING

PURPOSE:

To share experiences for the past week and honor one another's encounter with God's Word.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bible, candle with a sturdy base, plant or fresh flowers
- Watch or timer
- 3" x 5" index card for each member of the group with his or her name on it

PREPARATIONS:

- Arrange the seating so people can easily see one another.
- Create a focus table with the Bible, candle, and plant or flowers. Have the Bible open and the candle lit as people arrive.

PROCEDURE:

If anyone brought a symbol to share, place it on the focus table. (Those who brought symbols will have an opportunity to share them during the discussion. Others may wish to describe something that is symbolic for them.)

- 1. Begin by asking someone to read the scripture you have been praying throughout the week :

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he couldn't pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him the lord of that slave released

FIFTH GROUP MEETING

him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

— Matthew 18:23-35

➤ 2. Follow with three minutes of silence. (Use a watch or timer.) Ask that the group members reflect on their experiences during the week:

- a particular learning, insight or rediscovery
- a word, phrase, or image from the scripture that stood out or with which they especially identified
- God's revelation about their lives this week

➤ 3. Initiate group sharing. Invite anyone who has something to share to do so. If no one responds, use these questions to stimulate discussion. It's not necessary to cover all the questions. Because different people relate to different questions, it's helpful to read them all and then wait for someone to respond. At some meetings the entire discussion may be spent on just one question.

- How have you experienced God's presence this week?
- Did you have a particular learning, insight or rediscovery?
- With which character or image in the scripture did you most identify?

Finish the discussion ten minutes before the end of your meeting. This allows time for picking new prayer companions and the closing ritual. So as not to

end the discussion abruptly, give a five-minute warning by saying, "We have five minutes of discussion time left."

► 4. Pick new names for prayer companions. Place the 3" x 5" cards face down and mix them up. Each person draws a name; those who get their own draw again. Ask group members to write their new prayer companion's name in their workbooks.

► 5. Begin the closing ritual with a minute of silence. (Use your watch or a timer.) After the silence, ask everyone to look around the group with an awareness of how blessed all of you are to be sharing the journey of the spirit with one another. (Allow a brief moment to look around.) Ask the group to turn to this prayer in their books. Together pray:

Thank you, God, for calling us to this group.

Together we are on a journey
seeking a better understanding
of your Word.

Guide us to see how your Word
sheds light on our path
and brings us closer to you.

Help us be attentive to your presence
in our daily lives and to live out
your call to love one another.

Amen.

WEEK FIVE: SHARING GOD'S WORD

The story for this week is that
of the visitation of Mary to her cousin.
(Luke 1:39-55)

Week 5, Day 1



This week I am praying for _____.

PRAYER:

O God, you have called to me in the depths of my being. Through the people in my life, you have provided me with love and support. Continue to fill me with your Spirit that I may give thanks for those who have helped me grow closer to you. Bless all my relationships, and grant me the grace to keep them honest and loving. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

O Yahweh, it is good to give you thanks.
— Psalm 92:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story two or three times. You may want to read it silently and then aloud. There is power in the spoken word even when the voice is your own and you are the audience. Take your time. If something in the story gets your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.

WEEK 5, DAY 1

He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

— Luke 1:39-55



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth is a familiar story. As you understand the story now, what is the message for you?

This week you are going to look at the story in more depth than you may have in the past. As you read it today, did any words or phrases stand out or speak to you in a particular way? If so, circle them.

Choose a word, phrase, or image that has special meaning for you and write it here.

Use what you have written as a reminder of the story.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Come! See the deeds of the Most High.
— Psalm 46:8

END WITH PRAYER:

O gracious God, I proclaim your greatness and thank you for your everlasting love. Keep me mindful of the many ways you come to me. Help me see your love made manifest when a friend lends a listening ear or a stranger comes to my aid. Thank you for the people through whom I have heard your Word. Thank you also for those times when people have heard your Word through me. Grant me the grace to always trust in you and to know the joy that comes from living according to your Word. Amen.

Week 5, Day 2



PRAYER:

O God, you have called to me in the depths of my being. Through the people in my life, you have provided me with love and support. Continue to fill me with your Spirit that I may give thanks for those who have helped me grow closer to you. Bless all my relationships, and grant me the grace to keep them honest and loving. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

O Yahweh, it is good to give you thanks.
— Psalm 92:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

As you read the story today, focus on Elizabeth's experience of joy at the visit of Mary. You may want to read the story silently and then aloud. If something

grabs your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

— Luke 1:39-55



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

The tender meeting of Mary and Elizabeth shows the depth of their relationship. Elizabeth's pleasure is heightened even more when the child within her leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's voice. What a beautiful example of the working of the Holy Spirit through the words of another person.

Sometimes a comment we hear, a book we read, a movie we see, or other seemingly ordinary event causes something to "leap within us." Once while giving a conference in Nebraska, I had such an experience. As I was visiting with the participants after a morning presentation, a young man sitting in the back off-handedly said, "I wonder if what we've been talking about relates to how we approach social justice in the church?" In that moment I felt a rush from the center of my being, and two ideas I had been struggling with for several months came together with great clarity. It was as if the last piece of a puzzle had been put into place. I could hardly contain myself as I shared this gift of insight, and I ended by saying, "What a gift from God to me." Then looking at the young man who had made the comment, I said, "Thank you for being the Word of God for me this morning!" He happily responded, "Amen."

Recall a time when something "leapt within you." Did you view it as a gift from God at the time? If not, do you view it as such now that you are looking back at it? Write about your experience.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Come! See the deeds of the Most High.
— Psalm 46:8

END WITH PRAYER:

O gracious God, I proclaim your greatness and thank you for your everlasting love. Keep me mindful of the many ways you come to me. Help me see your love made manifest when a friend lends a listening ear or a stranger comes to my aid. Thank you for the people through whom I have heard your Word. Thank you also for those times when people have heard your Word through me. Grant me the grace to always trust in you and to know the joy that comes from living according to your Word. Amen.

Week 5, Day 3



PRAYER:

O God, you have called to me in the depths of my being. Through the people in my life, you have provided me with love and support. Continue to fill me with your Spirit that I may give thanks for those who have helped me grow closer to you. Bless all my relationships, and grant me the grace to keep them honest and loving. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

O Yahweh, it is good to give you thanks.
— Psalm 92:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

Read the story silently or aloud. As you read, focus on Elizabeth's affirmation of Mary and on Mary's response. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

— Luke 1:39-55



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Mary is the model of faith who has believed what was spoken to her by an angel of the Lord. Elizabeth affirms Mary's experience by calling both her and the child she will bear blessed. Mary then expresses herself in the great prayer known as the Magnificat. (The term *Magnificat* is the opening word of the prayer in the Latin translation of the Bible.) In the first part of the prayer Mary expresses her personal thanksgiving: though she is lowly, God can work through her for the salvation of many. In the second part, she expresses the thanksgiving of the nation.

Elizabeth's affirmation of what Mary already knows and Mary's response make the encounter unique to their circumstance. What about our experiences of being affirmed? Do we ever have our inner feelings—our knowings—affirmed by someone else? Julia, a young mother of four, wrote about such an experience in her journal:

I've been thinking about getting back into writing. I've not written anything, not even a poem, since Joe (our second child) was born. It's been so long I really wondered if I still had the talent and I even wondered if I was ever good at it anyway. I was standing at the sink and the phone rang. It was Susan, a college friend from whom I had not heard in ages. I don't believe what she said as an opening line to the conversation. This is a real gift. "Julia, I just had to call you. It's been a long time, but I was cleaning out some things and came across our college literary magazine and reread your short story that won you the scholarship money. I sat here and cried it was so beautiful. So I just had to call."

I believe that this was a call from God to affirm my own thoughts. Susan and I had a great talk and after I hung up, I went around singing at the top of my lungs and thanking God for this great gift.

Has there been a time in your life when you were affirmed by someone whose opinion meant a great deal to you? How did you react? Describe your experience.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Come! See the deeds of the Most High.
— Psalm 46:8

END WITH PRAYER:

O gracious God, I proclaim your greatness and thank you for your everlasting love. Keep me mindful of the many ways you come to me. Help me see your love made manifest when a friend lends a listening ear or a stranger comes to my aid. Thank you for the people through whom I have heard your Word. Thank you also for those times when people have heard your Word through me. Grant me the grace to always trust in you and to know the joy that comes from living according to your Word. Amen.

Week 5, Day 4



PRAYER:

O God, you have called to me in the depths of my being. Through the people in my life, you have provided me with love and support. Continue to fill me with your Spirit that I may give thanks for those who have helped me grow closer to you. Bless all my relationships, and grant me the grace to keep them honest and loving. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

O Yahweh, it is good to give you thanks.
— Psalm 92:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

As you read the story today, reflect on the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth. If something in the story holds your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

— Luke 1:39-55



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Who in your past has been an Elizabeth (mentor, friend, teacher, colleague, relative) and by word or action affirmed you at a critical time in your life? Who caused you to feel a movement within—a conviction that a certain decision or course of action was right for you?

Look back and think about people who have been Elizabeth for you. As you list each name, take a moment to reflect on your relationship with that person and its importance to your life.

- What was said or done by this person?
 - What “leapt within you”?
 - Were you changed in some way?
 - Did you celebrate in prayer, song or some other creative outlet?
-
-
-

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Come! See the deeds of the Most High.
— Psalm 46:8

END WITH PRAYER:

O gracious God, I proclaim your greatness and thank you for your everlasting love. Keep me mindful of the many ways you come to me. Help me see your love made manifest when a friend lends a listening ear or a stranger comes to my aid. Thank you for the people through whom I have heard your Word. Thank you also for those times when people have heard your Word through me. Grant me the grace to always trust in you and to know the joy that comes from living according to your Word. Amen.

Week 5, Day 5



PRAYER:

O God, you have called to me in the depths of my being. Through the people in my life, you have provided me with love and support. Continue to fill me with your Spirit that I may give thanks for those who have helped me grow closer to you. Bless all my relationships, and grant me the grace to keep them honest and loving. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

O Yahweh, it is good to give you thanks.
— Psalm 92:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

As you read the story today, focus again on Elizabeth's affirmation of Mary and on Mary's response. If something in the story holds your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

WEEK 5, DAY 5

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

— Luke 1:39-55



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Again today reflect on those times when God's love and care have been manifested in a Mary/Elizabeth experience. But instead of thinking of who has been an Elizabeth to you, ask yourself *To whom have I been an Elizabeth?* For whom have you been a mentor or friend? For whom have you provided the word or action through which God enlivened that person with the Holy Spirit?

Sometimes it is hard to imagine that we could be a vehicle of God's grace for another. Yet how often have people told us that they appreciated something we said or did? that some word or action of ours came at a critical time in their lives?

Look back and consider times when you may have been an Elizabeth to someone. As you write a name, take a moment to reflect on that relationship and how you think the Holy Spirit was at work.

- How did you affirm that person?
- What known effect did your affirmation have?
- In affirming someone else, were you in some way affirmed yourself?

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Come! See the deeds of the Most High.
— Psalm 46:8

WEEK 5, DAY 5

END WITH PRAYER:

O gracious God, I proclaim your greatness and thank you for your everlasting love. Keep me mindful of the many ways you come to me. Help me see your love made manifest when a friend lends a listening ear or a stranger comes to my aid. Thank you for the people through whom I have heard your Word. Thank you also for those times when people have heard your Word through me. Grant me the grace to always trust in you and to know the joy that comes from living according to your Word. Amen.

Week 5, Day 6



PRAYER:

O God, you have called to me in the depths of my being. Through the people in my life, you have provided me with love and support. Continue to fill me with your Spirit that I may give thanks for those who have helped me grow closer to you. Bless all my relationships, and grant me the grace to keep them honest and loving. This I ask both for myself and for _____, my companion on the way. Amen.

CENTER YOURSELF:

Prepare for your time with God's Word by relaxing your mind and body. Some people do this by sitting quietly; others prefer gentle body movement. It is commonplace to feel distracted and have your mind cluttered with random thoughts. Do not fight the thoughts or focus on new ones that come to mind. Instead, breathe deeply and reflect on this scripture:

O Yahweh, it is good to give you thanks.
— Psalm 92:1

Let this be a touchstone that you keep coming back to until you achieve an inner calm.

THE SCRIPTURE STORY:

As you read the story today, bask in the joy of celebration. If something holds your attention, pause and reflect on it. Be open to letting God's Spirit lead your thoughts.

WEEK 5, DAY 6

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

— Luke 1:39-55



REFLECTING AND RESPONDING

Review your life and recall times of great joy; times when you celebrated inwardly or with others. Write about one such experience. Instead of writing, you may prefer to sketch on a separate sheet of paper.

Refer to the **Reflecting and Responding** exercises for the past two days.

- Did you discover a pattern to the way you were affirmed?
- Were there more women or men on your lists?
- Were the people you remembered mostly from a particular time in your life?
- Did you recall people or events that were literally life-changing?

Elaborate on your yes responses. Looking back at your experiences of being affirmed will heighten your awareness of how God has been, and continues to be, at work in your life.

INNER RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD:

Free yourself of distractions and be attentive to God moving quietly within your mind and heart. Some people like to sit in stillness; others prefer to move their body in prayerful expression. If your attention wanders, return to this scripture:

Come! See the deeds of the Most High.
— Psalm 46:8

END WITH PRAYER:

O gracious God, I proclaim your greatness and thank you for your everlasting love. Keep me mindful of the many ways you come to me. Help me see your love made manifest when a friend lends a listening ear or a stranger comes to my aid. Thank you for the people through whom I have heard your Word. Thank you also for those times when people have heard your Word through me. Grant me the grace to always trust in you and to know the joy that comes from living according to your Word. Amen.



PREPARATION FOR THE GROUP MEETING

The next meeting will be the last in the program. As in previous meetings, you will be discussing your reflections for the past week. Time will also be allowed to discuss the entire program and what it has meant to you. Use these questions to help in your review:

- Was there a scripture story that you found particularly meaningful?
- Have you been more aware of God's presence since you began the program? In what way or ways?
- What has being in the *Alone with God* program meant to you?
- What are some practical ways you can live into your discoveries and rediscoveries?

Use these lines or a separate sheet of paper to respond to the questions or to note anything else you want to share at the meeting.

Remember to bring this book to the meeting.

SIXTH GROUP MEETING

PURPOSE:

To share experiences and celebrate being part of the *Alone With God* program

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bible, candle with a sturdy base, plant or fresh flowers
- Watch or timer
- Anything that would help celebrate the end of the program

PREPARATIONS:

- Arrange the seating so people can easily see one another.
- Create a focus table with the Bible, candle, and plant or flowers. Have the Bible open and the candle lit as people arrive. Include flowers or a plant as symbol of growth and change.

PROCEDURE:

If anyone brought a symbol to share, place it on the focus table. (Those who brought symbols will have an opportunity to share them during the discussion. Others may wish to describe something that is a symbol for them.)

- 1. Begin by asking someone to read the scripture everyone has been praying throughout the week:

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb

SIXTH GROUP MEETING

leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all
generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the
powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

— Luke 1:39-55

► 2. Follow with three minutes of silence. (Use a watch or timer.) Ask that the group members reflect on their experiences during the week:

- a particular learning, insight, or rediscovery
- a word, phrase, or image from the scripture with which they especially identified
- God’s revelation about their lives this week

➤ 3. Initiate group sharing. Because this is the last meeting of the group, shorten the usual discussion time by half to allow the group time to reflect on and celebrate their time together and the spiritual journey each is on. Ask:

- How have you experienced God's presence this week?
- Did you receive a particular learning, insight or rediscovery?
- With which character or image in the scripture reading did you most identify?

So as not to end the discussion abruptly, give a five-minute warning by saying, "We have five minutes of discussion time left."

➤ 4. Have one minute of silence. (Use a watch or timer.) In that time of silence, ask group members to reflect on

- a particular time of grace or insight during the past six weeks
- how their encounter with praying the scripture in the style presented in this workbook has contributed to their spiritual lives
- practical ways to continue growing in attentiveness to God's Word

After the minute of silence, ask people to share their reflections.

➤ 5. End the meeting by praying together the closing prayer:

Thank you, God, for calling us to this group.
Together we have been on a journey
seeking a better understanding
of your Word.
Guide us to see how your Word
sheds light on our path
and brings us closer to you.
Help us be attentive to your presence
in our daily lives and to live out
your call to love one another.
Amen.

Prayers

This section contains additional prayers that you may want to use throughout the day or substitute for those written into the sessions. To pray is to talk to God. Sometimes we want to talk to God spontaneously, choosing our words as the occasion demands. Other times we may choose to use formal or informal prayers written by others. And at yet other times, scripture is our prayer.

Included here are prayers and psalms to help you talk to God, and perhaps expand your prayer life. Some of the prayers are intended for use at specific times: morning, noon, evening, end of the day. Others may be used whenever they seem suitable. Besides the formal prayers (which follow the general pattern of “official” prayers of many denominations), there are shorter, informal prayers. Also there are specific prayers both for times of turmoil and for times of joy and thankfulness.

Christian history includes a tradition of praying several times during the day. In the past, when the rhythm of life was more set, prayer patterns were also more set. People set aside time to pray in the morning, again at noontime, in the late afternoon, and finally just before going to sleep.

Do you find yourself feeling too rushed to pray at noon or later in the day? This is not unusual. But the busyness that causes us to skip prayer time may be all the more reason to pray. Sharing a few thoughts with God might be the very thing needed to get us through a busy afternoon. If you have to face the demands of children at home, the pressure of a business meeting, the intensity of studying, or any of a hundred other stressful activities, try praying on a regular basis. Take time to pray at noon and later in the afternoon as well. Pray just before the kids come home from school or at the end of your coffee break. Pray while you are headed home after work, or right after dinner and before beginning your evening activities. Pick a time that will be available on a typical day, and make praying at that time as much of a habit as eating.

If your prayer life has become lax, make a commitment during one of your alone-with-God sessions to get back into the prayer habit. Pray morning, mid-day, afternoon, and end-of-the-day prayers regularly for three weeks. At the end of that time, you are likely to find the discipline becoming a natural and welcome part of your day.

IN THE MORNING

INTRODUCTION

Come, bless Yahweh,
all you who serve Yahweh.
— Psalm 134:1

PSALM

Alleluia!
I will thank you, Yahweh, with all my heart
in the meeting of the just and their assembly.
Great are your works
to be pondered by all who love them.
Glorious and sublime are your works;
your justice stands firm forever.
You help us remember your wonders.
You are compassion and love.
You give food to those who fear you,
keeping your covenant ever in mind.
You have shown your might to your people
by giving them the lands of the nations.
Your works are justice and truth;
your precepts are all of them sure;
they are steadfast forever and ever,
made in uprightness and faithfulness.
You have sent deliverance to your people
and established your covenant forever.
Holy your name, greatly to be feared.*
To fear** you is the beginning of wisdom;
all who do so prove themselves wise.
Your praise shall last forever!

— Psalm 111

*Our English version may make it difficult for us to understand the richness of meaning the psalmist is attempting to convey. The writer wants the reader to realize that the very name of the Lord ought to fill us with a combination of wonder, awe, respect, and love.

**We might better understand “fear” in this context to mean “respect-filled love.”

PRAYERS

RESPONSE

For my life . . . I praise you, loving Creator.

For the newly created day and opportunity . . . I praise you, loving Creator.

For all the people who love me, and all those who find it hard to love me . . . I praise you, loving Creator.

For Jesus Christ . . . I praise you, loving Creator.

SCRIPTURE READING

Then, turning to the disciples Jesus said to them privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

— Luke 10:23-24

PRAYER

O God, you are the mighty creator and sustainer of the world. You placed me in the midst of your creation that I might see your goodness and praise your mighty works. Grant me the insight to continue to foster the right use and protection of the earth, that all may be brought into the fullness of the light of the world, Jesus. Amen.

SILENT TIME FOR PERSONAL INTERCESSIONS

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BLESSING

May the God who placed me in the midst of this creation fill me with the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



MIDDAY PRAYER

INTRODUCTION

As the sun is high in the sky, may I stand in the brightness of your light, O God.

PSALM

God, show your faithfulness, bless us,
and make your face smile on us!
For then the earth will acknowledge your ways,
and all the nations will know of your power to save.
May all the nations praise you, O God;
may all the nations praise you!
Let the nations shout and sing for joy
since you dispense true justice to the world.
You grant strict justice to the peoples;
on earth you guide the nations.
Let the nations praise you, God;
let all the nations praise you!
The soil has given its harvest;
God, our God, has blessed us.
May God continue to bless us;
and let God be feared to the very ends of the earth.

— Psalm 67

PRAYER

I acclaim you, gracious God, for all your mighty gifts. You provide me with bread and drink day by day. You cover me with your wings of protection within my home. Open my eyes to see more clearly your power in our midst, that all those I know may come to an ever greater understanding of your love. Grant that as I come to appreciate your love more and more, I may be a reminder for others that you are gracious to your people. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYERS

SCRIPTURE READING

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

— Matthew 6:25-26

SILENCE TO REFLECT ON HOW THE WORD RELATES TO YOUR LIFE

INTERCESSIONS

For all who are homeless . . . I pray in trust, O Provider.

For all who are hungry . . . I pray in trust, O Provider.

For all who are at war . . . I pray in trust, O Provider.

For all who seek truth and justice . . . I pray in trust, O Provider.

For all people whose lives I touch . . . I pray in trust, O Provider.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BLESSING

As God makes the sun to shine on the earth, may God's face shine upon me. Amen.



EVENING PRAYER

INTRODUCTION

At the setting of the sun, may God be blessed!

PSALM

Alleluia!
Praise, you servants of Yahweh,
praise the name of Yahweh!

PRAYERS

May Yahweh's name be blessed
both now and forever!
From east to west, from north to south,
praised be the name of Yahweh!
High above all nations, Yahweh!
Your glory transcends the heavens!
Who is like you, Yahweh our God?
Enthroned so high, you have to stoop
to see the heavens and earth!
You raise the poor from the dust
and lift the needy from the dunghill
to give them a place with rulers,
with the nobles of your people.
Yahweh, you give the barren a home,
making them glad with children.

— Psalm 113

RESPONSE

For all the times I have been forgiven . . . may God be blessed.
For my friends and family . . . may God be blessed.
For the times I have felt God's presence . . . may God be blessed.
For this time of prayer . . . may God be blessed.

SCRIPTURE READING

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

— Matthew 13:47-48

PRAYER

God, as I come to the evening of this day, grant that I may see more clearly all the aspects of my life, those for which I give thanks and those for which I ask forgiveness. Lead me to a greater understanding of the importance of decisions I make each day. Grant that I may be a symbol of the kingdom of heaven to those people I already know and those I am about to meet. Amen.

PRAYERS

SILENT TIME FOR PERSONAL INTERCESSIONS

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BLESSING

May the Spirit that filled this day with life and new opportunities continue to fill this evening and night with the power of God's love. Amen.



PRAYER AT DAY'S END

INTRODUCTION

Blessed be the God of the heavens, of the sun and of the moon.

PSALM

Come, bless Yahweh,
all you who serve Yahweh,
ministering in the house of Yahweh,
in the courts of the house of our God!
Lift up your hands toward the sanctuary;
praise Yahweh night after night!
May Yahweh bless you from Zion,
the One who made heaven and earth!

— Psalm 134

SILENCE FOR INTERCESSIONS

SCRIPTURE READING

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

— Hebrews 13:20-21

SILENCE FOR CONFESSION OF YOUR FAULTS OF THIS DAY

PRAYER

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your Word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

— Luke 2:29-32

BLESSING

May God grant me a peaceful night, and give strength to those who work while I sleep.



MORNING PRAYER

God, at the beginning of this new day
I give thanks to you with my whole heart.
For my life . . . I praise you.
For the newly created day
and the opportunity it may bring . . . I praise you.
For all my friends . . . I praise you.
Grant me patience and understanding, and
may your ever-present love be felt by those I know.
Today, I ask especially that you bless
(my spouse, friend, boss, child, neighbor).
Amen.

MIDDAY PRAYER

In the middle of this busy day,
I turn to you, God, with hope in my heart.
I look at the birds of the air, who neither sow nor reap,
and try to understand that you care for them
and you care for me.

PRAYERS

Caring God, I am grateful for all my blessings,
but I continue to need your help.
Open my eyes so that I see more clearly
how your love may come to life through me
as I go about my work this afternoon.
Amen.

EVENING PRAYER

O God, it has been a busy day
and I need to feel
your comforting presence.
Refresh me
so that I might be patient
with those I love.
Amen.

PRAYER AT DAY'S END

Now, at the end of my day,
I place my trust in you, ever present God.
Be present to all those people
who are important to me,
especially (names).
Forgive me for whatever hurts I have caused,
strengthen the belief that lies within my heart,
and grant me a restful sleep.
Amen.

PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

God of all creation, I ask pardon for my faults,
for all the times when I have done or thought
or said things harmful
to myself or others.
I regret those times when through negligence
I did not do, think, or say what would have helped.
Forgive me as I forgive others who have harmed me.
I ask to be forgiven in Jesus' name.
Amen.

PRAYERS

PRAYER OF PRAISE TO GOD

For all those who love me, I praise you, God.
For this time alone, I praise you.
For all those who have been my teachers, I praise you.
For the beauty of sun and sky, I praise you.
For my mind and all it can do, I praise you.
For life and love, I praise you.
Amen.

PRAYER OF GRIEF

Dear God, death is so hard to accept.
I feel anger, pain.
I feel numb and empty.
I do not sleep well, I do not eat well.
Dear God, death is so hard to understand.
I feel no joy, no hope.
I only feel love lost.
Dear God, help me survive the pain of loss.
I pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

PRAYER FOR PATIENCE

I know that being patient is not one of my strengths.
Everyone who knows me knows that.
Today, I don't even have the patience to pray!
God, please help me to sit quietly,
breathe deeply, and be patient.
Amen.

PRAYER OF HOPE

O God, I have a song to sing.
Help me sing it.
I have a dream to make real.
Help me to do it.
I have myself to be.
Help me to be all that I can be.

PRAYERS

And if I stop singing or forget my dreams,
help me to begin again with hope.
Amen.

PRAYER FOR BELIEF

God of wind and setting sun,
God of babies crying and kids playing,
God of my best dreams,
I want to believe.
I want my belief to be something
that encourages me to grow.
I want my belief to be something
that guides me toward finding meaning in life.
I seek a faith to free me to live, not just exist.
Dear God, this is my prayer: Help me to believe.
Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SICK

God, Creator of life,
you know I don't handle sickness very well.
Help those who, like me, are sick of being sick.
Inspire nurses and doctors to have compassion,
and to take time to listen to patients
who need a friendly word as much as medicine.
Guide visitors to the bedridden at home who feel forgotten.
Bestow patience on anyone who suffers alone.
Help me to be faithful to my beliefs
in times of sickness as well as times of health.
I pray in the name of Jesus,
who suffered and died that we might live.
Amen

PRAYER FOR THE DIVORCED

God, will I ever understand?
I believed in marriage, gave to it the best I could.
Still, it has ended.
And there is pain. And anger. And fear.

PRAYERS

There has never been a time in my life
when I felt such a need for someone to love me.
Please, take away my sense of failure.
Please, let me sense your presence in my life,
and help me feel worthy once again.
Amen.

PRAYER FOR FAMILIES

Dear God, I pray that you watch over
and protect all families.
I pray especially for troubled families.
Where there is abuse, bring change.
Where there is infidelity, restore faithful love.
Where there is yelling, inspire calm.
Where there is alienation, reunite people.
Make us all more sensitive to one another's needs
so that we may reach out in love
to create strong families and wise people.
Amen.

PSALM 4

Answer me when I call, God, my defender!
When I was in trouble, you came to my help.
Be kind to me now; hear my prayer!
How long will you people insult me?
How long will you love what is worthless
and seek what is false?
Remember that Yahweh has chosen me
and hears me when I call.
Tremble, and stop your sinning;
think deeply about this, alone and silent in your rooms.
Offer the right sacrifices to the Holy One
and put your trust in God.
There are many who say, "How we wish to receive a blessing!"
Look on us with kindness, Yahweh!
The joy that you give me is much greater
than the joy of those who have an abundance of grain and wine.
As soon as I lie down, I peacefully go to sleep;
you alone, my Strength, keep me perfectly safe.