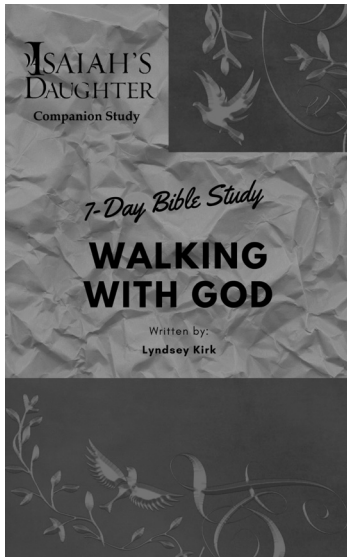


WALKING WITH GOD

A 7-DAY COMPANION STUDY FOR ISAIAH'S
DAUGHTER

MESU ANDREWS

WALKING WITH GOD



LISTENING FOR GOD

DAY ONE

Listening for God can be a difficult task. Even though I have two ears and only one mouth, I often find that I talk more than I listen – in my everyday life, and also in my relationship with God. Prayer is simple when I am simply speaking my heart or my requests to God. It is a lot more difficult whenever I try to listen for His response.

Isaiah's wife, Aya, is one of my favorite characters in *Isaiah's Daughter*. I get the sense that her insights and wisdom have been honed from a lifetime of faithfully seeking Yahweh. In the passage below, I love the way Aya describes her intimate communication with God...

[Aya] looked at [Ishma] with glistening eyes. "Do you know why Master Isaiah calls me a prophetess?" I shook my head but was eager to hear. "It's not because I proclaimed Yahweh's words to kings or predicted future events that came to pass. Isaiah calls me prophetess because I speak with Yahweh as a friend—and He answers."

My mind began to spin with questions, but the most important came out first. "How do you hear Yahweh's voice?"

“How do you call a palm dove to light on your arm?”

Obedient but confused, I answered her question. “I become peaceful and then sing the dove’s song.”... “It’s the trust and familiarity between me and my dove that creates the bond. Only after the second year would the dove light on a platform and take food from my hand. It was the third summer before it actually landed on my arm.”

Mistress nodded. “Talk with Yahweh, Ishma. A bond will form, and He’ll become familiar, Someone you can trust. You’ll come know His voice...”

Wow! Don’t we all wish our relationship with God was like that? “I speak with Yahweh as a friend, and He answers.” – What would it look like if our lives were characterized by that kind of intimacy with God?

Jesus refers to Himself as the “Good Shepherd” who “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” He says that His sheep “will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” (John 10:3-5). It makes me wonder: Do I know God’s voice that well? Can I distinguish his voice from a “stranger’s voice”? Which voice am I listening to and following? Or...am I even trying to listen at all?

What about you? How do you listen for God? In your regular, mundane, everyday life – as you drink the coffee, go to work, take the kids to school, run to extracurricular activities, figure out a plan for dinner, pay the bills, say your prayers, and finally lay your head down on your pillow – how do you hear and discern the voice of God in your life? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? Is it like the voice of a Good Shepherd? Can you distin-

guish it from a “stranger’s voice”? Are you trying to listen at all?

Questions:

How would it change the way you live, the way you feel, the way you interact with the world around you if you could say, “I speak with God as a friend, and He answers” or “I know my Shepherd’s voice”?

IN WHAT AREAS of your life would you like to hear God’s voice? Make a list of some specific things for which you would like God’s counsel.

WHAT CAN you do today to begin to foster that kind of relationship with our God and Father? How would you begin to build a relationship with a new friend?

Today’s Activity:

Today, try to include at least 10 minutes of actively talking to God and listening for His voice. This could be at all once, but I encourage you to do it throughout the day. Talk to God when you’re driving, when you’re getting ready in the morning, in between meetings, in the drive-thru lane. Talk to Him as you would to a friend. Tell Him what’s on your heart and your mind. Tell Him your cares, your hopes, your worries, and your fears for the day, or for the moment. It might seem silly at first if you’ve never talked to God this way, but give it a try and see what happens. And then, *listen*. This might be the most difficult part, but go ahead and give it a try. This

part may take some extra effort to get into a place of silence, at least internal silence. I find that my heart, my mind, and my spirit are more open to listening for God when I am either in His Word, in nature, listening to worship music, or simply sitting and being still. Take some moments today to sit with your Father in silence and listen for His voice, His truth, His peace in your soul. If you don't have a regular habit of sitting still, even 5 minutes might feel like a lot for you. But give it a try and see how God begins to meet you and speak to your heart.

One final note about listening for God: it's hard to hear when your heart is hard.

The writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to listen for God's voice with openness and without hardness of heart:

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested and tried me...That is why I was angry with that generation; I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.'"
(Hebrews 3:7-10).

Ouch. That stings a little. I wonder how much I miss out on hearing God's voice because of my hardness of heart. In my life, I think my heart begins to harden, when I want something, and it doesn't come through – maybe a certain success in my job, restoration in a relationship, healing for a friend or family member, recognition from that specific person – it can be anything really. And sadly and foolishly, I blame God. I wonder how often He has tried to speak to me and I simply couldn't hear because of my hardness of heart.

The good news is:

God continues to pursue a relationship with me even when I have failed to pursue one with Him.

My status before Him does not depend on my efforts to draw near to Him. But the depth of intimacy and joy I experience in my relationship with Him might depend on some of my efforts to draw near.

Ask God to show you today where your heart is hard, or where you might be blaming Him or grasping for idols rather than holding onto Him. Write down anything that comes to mind.

Prayer

Lord, please soften our hearts today and help us to hear your voice and not turn away. Please help us to follow you and trust you as our Good Shepherd. Deafen our ears to all other voices and influences but yours. And Father, give us sacred spaces and moments today to speak with you as a friend build intimacy and trust with You. Amen.

OBEYING GOD (WHEN IT'S HARD)

DAY TWO

Has God ever asked you to do something that felt impossible?

Check out this scene in Scripture with the prophet Isaiah:

“...at that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, ‘Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,’ and he did so, walking *naked and barefoot*. Then the LORD said, ‘As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt.’” (Isaiah 20:2-4)

Talk about impossible! Walking naked and barefoot...for three years?! No, thank you! I’m pretty sure I would have run fast in the other direction from that call.

Through this passage from *Isaiah’s Daughter* we can

imagine how his difficult call may have felt for our prophet friend, Isaiah...

ISAIAH SPENT the morning in the prophets' caves. It felt like holy ground as he peered through torchlight at abandoned tents and the ashes of cook fires. Yahweh had hidden his friends here for fifteen years. He needed the assurance of that miracle-working God after the message Yahweh delivered during the night...

Isaiah ran his hand along the walls of the cave, reminding himself of Yahweh's faithfulness. For over fifteen years, the Lord had protected his family as they delivered food and supplies to God's faithful prophets. Judean troops never detected them, and provisions never ran out. "If you can protect thirty prophets for fifteen years, surely you can protect one naked prophet for three years." Even saying it out loud made Isaiah's cheeks flush.

He cried out in the depths of the cave, "How will you provide for my family this time, Yahweh?" Racking sobs shook him, and he fell to his knees. Was it pride that made the coming task so frightening? "Please, send someone else to do this." But the heaviness remained. He was the one Yahweh chose to walk barefoot and naked through Jerusalem's streets for three years—Isaiah ben Amoz, cousin to kings...

I THINK many of God's commands can feel impossible to us. Heavy. Weighty. By our nature we are not prone to loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength or loving our neighbors as ourselves. We are not prone to walking as Jesus walked and loving as He loved. It's hard.

But James tells us that our journey of faith must include action.

“But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works...Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that *faith was active along with his works*, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God” (James 2:18-23).

This passage in James gives us a hint about where our strength and motivation for obedience can come from – faith, or knowing and remembering the Lord. Much like in the above passage, where Isaiah drew on his previous experiences of God’s faithfulness, I think our ancestor in the faith, Abraham, must have done the same thing. What did it take for Abraham to believe God, and therefore act? I think it took a relationship – some past experiences with God that he could draw on. As human beings, our belief is rarely blind. We believe because we have seen at least some kind of “evidence” from which we can draw conclusions and move forward with action. I believe the same is true in our relationship with God. We see Him – in the grandeur of the mountains, in the love of another, in the beauty of a song, in the splendor and mystery of a newborn child, in an unexplainable sense in our souls – and we remember His faithfulness in our lives – in hardship, in good times, in provision, in His peace and indwelling Spirit, through His work on the cross – and these things help us believe. Our belief (faith) then motivates us to action, leaning into the God we know.

Questions

What is one command that God has been pressing on your heart recently that you have had a hard time obeying?

WHY DO you think this particular command is so difficult for you?

SO WHAT DO you do when obeying is hard? Write down some practices that help you obey during the hard times. Perhaps, like Isaiah, you lean into the God you have known. Let me encourage you, whether you've known him a little or you've known him a lot—lean in. Remember the God you have known, remember what he has done for you, and let the evidences of his past faithfulness spur you on toward new steps of obedience.

NOW TAKE a few minutes to write down some specific ways that God has been faithful to you in your walk with Him thus far. Write down as many as you can.

BASED ON THESE TWO LISTS, how can you expect God to be good, true, and faithful to you in the commands He has asked you to follow?

Today's Activity

Make a goal of one small step of obedience you will take today.

Prayer

God, in light of who you are to us, we step out in faith to obey your commands and your call. We know you call us for our joy and goodness and for your glory. Help us, oh Lord, to surrender and submit our hearts, our minds, and our wills to You. Help us to love and obey you. Help us to see you more clearly. Spur us on toward a deeper faith that springs us into action. Amen.

WAITING ON GOD

DAY THREE

Ok it's day three, and we are about to get into some tough stuff of walking with God. If obedience is hard, I think waiting on God is harder. What do you do when God's promises, God's goodness, or God's answers don't come through on your timeline? We live in an instant world. Drive thru restaurants, microwave popcorn, instant coffee, Google – so many things, from food to information, are available to us in an instant. And honestly, I think most of us struggle to be patient. I know I do. It is hard to develop a value for letting things marinate, percolate, be in process, and slowly unfold, when almost anything we want can be bought and acquired in an instant.

Learning patience for little irritations is one thing, but what about the bigger things in life? What about when God doesn't seem to come through on the issues that have a little higher stakes than, say, waiting in a drive thru line or getting stuck behind that terribly slow driver on the highway? What do we do then?

In this passage from *Isaiah's Daughter* we see the prophet Isaiah dealing with the honest and difficult questions of the

children under his care – questions about waiting, and questions which I think are not too far from my experience and maybe yours...

“TODAY WE’LL BEGIN a discussion on prophecy. Years ago, I relayed to King Ahaz God’s promise to protect Judah from the kings of Israel and Aram if our king would trust in Yahweh alone. Yahweh also prom—”

“But Yahweh didn’t protect us, Master Isaiah.” Hezekiah interrupted, which he often did.

“True, but we must look at the full prophecy. Yahweh’s protection was conditional. He said, ‘If you don’t stand on your faith, you won’t stand at all.’ He then challenged King Ahaz to ask for a sign, an unprecedented gift—anything the king asked in the deepest depths or the highest heights. The king refused.”

...“Maybe Abba didn’t ask because he was afraid Yahweh wouldn’t answer.” Hezekiah’s voice again. “Yahweh doesn’t always answer, you know.”

Other boys nodded, and Ishma’s eyes grew wide—as they always did when she was gathering her courage. “Yahweh didn’t answer when I prayed for the soldiers who killed my parents to go away. Why is that, Master Isaiah?”

Isaiah felt a stab of fear at the consequence of his undertaking. He wasn’t simply teaching Israel’s history or even prophetic interpretation. He was shaping the foundational truths that would grow these children into their adult faith. Yahweh, give me wisdom!

“Hezekiah, you’ve reminded me of an important fact. Only God knows the motives of a man’s heart, so I can’t know the reason your abba refused the sign from Yahweh. However, when God promises something, He most certainly will do it. Someday—it may not be today or tomorrow or even in our

lifetimes—but someday all Yahweh’s promises will come to pass.”

IN THE WRESTLING of these children, I hear some of my own heart. Why doesn’t God always answer my prayers? Why doesn’t He show up in His power and make things better for me or the people I love? Why doesn’t He show up with His goodness and bring His Kingdom to earth now?

Waiting on God is hard.

I always find comfort when one of the characters of the Bible speaks questions, frustrations, or doubts that I carry in my own heart. It gives me comfort in knowing I’m not the only one. I like this account of prophet Habakkuk hashing it out with the Lord over this question of “How long?” ...

How long, LORD, must I call for help,

but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, “Violence!”

but you do not save?

Why do you make me look at injustice?

Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;

there is strife, and conflict abounds.

Therefore the law is paralyzed,

and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,

so that justice is perverted

“Look at the nations and watch—

and be utterly amazed.

For I am going to do something in your days

that you would not believe,

even if you were told.”

(Habakkuk 1:1-5) *emphasis added*

*I will stand at my watch
 and station myself on the ramparts;
 I will look to see what he will say to me,
 and what answer I am to give to this complaint.
 Then the LORD replied:
 "Write down the revelation
 and make it plain on tablets
 so that a herald may run with it.
 For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
 it speaks of the end
 and will not prove false.
 Though it linger, wait for it;
 it will certainly come
 and will not delay.
 (Habakkuk 2:1-3)*

Questions

What in life have you been feeling impatient about recently? A certain person, situation, or event that you wish could be instantly better? Are there some areas in your life right now where you find yourself asking God, "How long"?

ARE there any prayers you have been praying that have not yet been answered by God? What are they?

HOW DOES God's command to wait for it, "though it linger" sit with you? Does it bring you comfort or challenge?

Today's Activity

Often times I like to think the universe is mine to hold in the palm of my hand, that somehow by all my efforts I can control it, and it would be nice to determine the times and the seasons of the world. But God's word to Habakkuk reminds me just how small I am and just how much I can't handle such big ideas and plans.

"I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told."

Thanks for the humbling reminder, God. Even if God did answer all our specific questions of "Why," "How long," and "When," we still would not believe and would not know what to do with the information. There is a reason God runs the universe and we are just a tiny speck in it. The world is His to run. Our job is to wait, watch, and trust.

Take a few minutes right now to look over the lists you made above and intentionally submit each of those things to the Father. Lift them up to Him in prayer once again, and if you can, simply open your hands and release those things to Him for good. The world His to run. We can trust His promises, though they linger. He is working things that we do not yet know.

Even though I am terrible at waiting, especially for lingering promises that I have not seen yet, the book of Hebrews brings me encouragement and perspective for the waiting. It reminds me that my faith is not about trusting because I know, but rather our faith is:

“confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Boy. That’s hard sometimes. And I need the reminder of people like Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab who clung tightly to this kind of faith in God, even when they could not see...

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. (Hebrews 11:13).

Prayer

Lord, help me to wait in faith like these men and women of old. Help us to seek you even when my eyes cannot see. Grant us more faith. Forgive us for our impatience and our lack of trust in you. Please give us faith to believe, even when and even though we cannot see. Help us to remain faithful even if we never see your promises revealed in our lifetimes. Oh Lord, hold fast to us with your promises and plans, even when, in the waiting, we struggle to hold fast to our belief in you.

CRYING OUT TO GOD

DAY FOUR

Are you one of those people who is a crier? You know, one of those weepy individuals who can always be seen wiping away a tear, misting, leaking, whatever you want to call it? You know who you are. Whether happy or sad, overjoyed or discouraged, it just comes out of your eyes. You can't help it! Well, I am definitely not one of those people. In fact, I have had to learn to give myself permission to go ahead and cry. It has been a journey. Thankfully though, I know a few criers, and they encourage me along the path.

No matter whether you are a self-proclaimed crier or not, we all have things that our hearts “cry out” about. If you are a human being living on this earth, I am sure you have felt deeply broken about something in your lifetime. And when we are broken, I think crying out is a good response.

Praise God for giving us the Psalms as a part of His Word for us. These hymns, meant to be used for collective worship for the people of God, are full of the whole expanse of human emotions. There's no hiding your feelings from God in the Psalms. No passive-aggressive, polite comments.

There is wailing despair, angry questioning, impatient ranting, exultant praise, endless gratitude, and everything in between. Praise God for giving us this example, so that we might know that it is completely acceptable for us to bring our every emotion to Him, “sanctified” or not.

In this scene from *Isaiah’s Daughter* we see Hezekiah bearing his heart before God, in a moment of deep emotion and pain...

WEEPING BITTERLY, his words were heard only by the One who formed him. “Please, Yahweh, remember me. Remember that I have walked faithfully before you with my whole heart. I’ve done everything I thought was right in your eyes. Everything.”

How could God leave him? His whole life had been focused on doing right. When Abba had done evil, when Ima had schemed, Hezi had followed God’s Law and meditated on His Word. When Zibah had remained childless, Hezi had remained steadfast, certain Yahweh would give them an heir.

Was he a fool? Was Yahweh a figment of his imagination like the idols of wood and stone? No. Yahweh was real. He must be real. What about all the prophecies that had come to pass?

What about those that hadn’t? Would Assyria march through Jerusalem’s gates?

He reached for his hair but couldn’t tear it out because his hands were rotting away. “Yahweh, why?” he sobbed. Everything within him believed there was a God listening to his questions, sharing his sorrow, and deciding Judah’s future. Why had He suddenly grown distant?

Weary to the bone, Hezi closed his eyes...

THIS SCENE IS SO HEART-WRENCHING. This is a picture of a

man at the end of his rope. Have you ever been there? Illness, pain, suffering, failure, death, rejection, poverty, tragedy, abandonment, abuse – any of these things can leave us feeling deeply, deeply broken. We may wonder if there is any hope for healing and wholeness, any hope for restored bodies or reconciled relationships, any hope for *shalom*, the perfect peace described to us in the Scriptures.

Questions

What emotions do you feel completely comfortable expressing to God? To other people?

WHAT EMOTIONS DO you feel like you have to suppress? Are there any emotions that make you feel ashamed, just for having them?

WHERE ARE you hoping for wholeness and peace in your life?

Is there any situation that you have given up on? Anything too big, too painful, too deep, or too difficult to talk about or hope for?

Today's Activity

One of the stories from the Old Testament that has always stuck with me is the story of Hagar. Have you ever felt like you were stuck in the wilderness, rejected, oppressed, cast out and alone? Hagar was literally in that situation.

“The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, ‘Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?’ She said, ‘I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.’ The angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Return to your mistress and submit to her.’ The angel of the LORD also said to her, ‘I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.’ And the angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.’ So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, ‘*You are a God of seeing,*’ for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” (Genesis 16:7-13)

Our God has always been a God who sees us. A God who looks after us. He is not too far away or too big or too busy to be concerned with the intimate details of our lives. He sees us. He looks after us. He knows us and He takes care of us. Wherever you are at, whatever wilderness you may feel stuck in, our God sees. And He is ready to hear from you...anything you have to say to Him. Let today’s prayer also be your activity...

Prayer

Today, let’s end by participating in the prayers of God’s people. Use Psalm 103 as a springboard for expressing your feelings to God. Whatever things you wrote down today, use this psalm to help you talk to God about them. Tell him the

feelings that are easy for you to speak, as well as the ones that might be frightening to bring forth. Tell Him where you want wholeness and peace, even if a situation seems hopeless or stuck. He sees you. You can cry out to Him from the depths.

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is plentiful redemption.

And he will redeem Israel

from all his iniquities.

DAY FIVE

WORSHIPPING GOD

What does it mean to truly worship our God? Worship is primarily about 2 things: 1) what or whom we are we worshipping, and 2) how we worship.

Worship simply means to attribute worth to something or someone. You and I worship each and every day, as we give our money, our time, our strength, our resources to the things and people around us. We attribute worth to items and to people each and every day. We are in worship to something or someone nearly every moment of our lives.

So this begs the question...what, or whom, are you worshipping? One way to think of answering this question is to think of what is the most valuable possession you own, or the thing on which you spend the most money? Or what is the relationship you invest in the most? Write down some things that you might be attributing worth to, in big and small ways.

I do not mean to suggest that it is bad for us to pay the bills, buy a new car, invest time in our families and neighbors, and love the people around us. Worshipping God does

not mean we give all of our money to the church and none to pay the bills, or that we spend all of our time in prayer and in direct relationship with God and none of it with other people. That would be a poor way to define worship. Even monks do not pray 24/7...they have to sleep sometime. So what is worshipping God really about? How do we attribute worth to *Him* even as we pay the bills and love our spouses and children. What is good and true worship before God?

GOD HAD GIVEN the ancient Israelites specific instructions for how to worship Him – how to build the temple, how to consecrate priests, how to offer sacrifices – anything they needed to know about interacting with their God was written down for them by Moses as he received instruction from the Lord. But real people, hearts, and motives are trickier than following rules. In this scene from *Isaiah's Daughter*, King Hezekiah and Isaiah wrestle with what it means for the people to truly worship God...

Yahweh, why should Your people's offerings be refused because Your priests have shirked their duty? Since great sabbath Uzziah's days, Judeans had abandoned Yahweh's Temple, worshipping instead on pagan high places. Hezi had taken away those high places to follow God's Law completely. Should he now turn them away from God's Temple?

Hezi looked again toward the eastern gate at the crowd of people pleading to worship. They were like drowning men in a stormy sea. He returned his attention to the high priest. "You will receive their offerings, Azariah. These people have obeyed Yahweh's commands, and they will not be turned away. Do you hear me?"

"My lord, we haven't enough priests to –"

“You will allow the Levites to present the burnt offerings until enough of your lazy relatives are consecrated.”

“The Law requires that only priests sacrifice the burnt –”

“The Law requires that priests fulfill their duties to Yahweh, but that hasn’t moved them into service, now has it, Azariah?”

“No . . . I mean . . . I’ll assign some of the Levites to present the sacrifices, my lord.” Azariah hurried to obey, shouting at Levites, priests, and Temple guards to receive the offerings of all who came.

Isaiah stood like a boulder, silent and immovable, “You’ve just ordered Yahweh’s high priests to break the Law of Moses.”

The condemnation landed like a rock in Hezi’s gut. “Yes, I did, and I would do it again if it meant those people could worship Yahweh. When I returned from Damascus, you said Yahweh was weary of meaningless sacrifices. Even you had stopped coming to this Temple, Isaiah – to the one place where Yahweh meets with his people – because He had removed His presence.” He pointed to the waiting crowd. “They’re coming back because they sensed Yahweh’s presence has returned, and their hearts are hungry for Him. They yearn to offer Him gifts – meaningful gifts – and we will not turn them away.”

“I’m not the enemy, Hezekiah.” Isaiah’s tone never changed. “Yahweh gave us His Law to protect us, guide us. There will be unforeseen consequences if you break His commands. Like the atoning blood, we may not fully understand, but we must trust and obey Him.”

Wow! What a sticky situation! These two God-fearing, God-loving men cannot come to an agreement on what it means to truly worship God. What kind of worship pleases Him? Is true worship found in our hearts and motives, or is it found in the specific actions we perform? I like King Hezekiah’s heart for worship in this scene. He sees a people who have previously forsaken their God for the worship of

other gods, a people who have been distinctly attributing worth to anything but God, and they now want to come back to Him with a sacrifice. He sees their hearts for worship, and he thinks that matters.

Questions

When you think of *personal* worship, what comes to mind? Singing songs on a Sunday morning? Playing in a worship band at church? King David playing a harp before the Lord? What images come to mind?

Now, when you try to think of the kind of worship that God requires of you, the kind He longs for, the ways He wants you to draw near, what comes to mind?

WHAT ABOUT THE acts of worship that flow freely from your heart? The worship that makes you feel alive or comes from a place of passion and joy within you...what does that look like?

ARE these three images the same, or different? Explain.



READ ISAIAH 1:11-20. What do you understand from this passage about what God wants from His people in worship? What does He not want?

WHY DO you think God calls their offerings, their festivals, and their prayers meaningless and detestable? Aren't these the very things He had commanded? What is "negating" these practices as worship?

IT SEEMS that God is making it clear through this passage that the worship He desires is not just the actions we perform. Our hearts have to be in it as well. Our hearts have to be headed towards His heart.

ARE there any practices that God has commanded for us that you have been practicing with an empty heart, or a heart that isn't actually seeking Him or attributing worth to *Him*?



JESUS SPOKE on this concept of worship with a woman who was concerned about just how she was supposed to worship. She wondered what the specific places and times and practices were for godly worship. He said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:19-24). "Spirit and truth" – this is how Jesus explains what true worship looks like. Perhaps it is not about worshipping in a specific

place, city, temple, or mountain. Maybe it is something more than that. Something deeper is involved. If God is Spirit and truth, then somehow our spirits must interact with His Spirit in worship.

If worship is not relegated to a certain time or place, or to just singing songs on a Sunday morning, what can you do to worship God today wherever you are? How can you *attribute worth* to your Father in heaven today? How can you set your spirit toward His Spirit, so to speak?



MAYBE WORSHIP SOMEHOW ENCOMPASSES our whole lives, maybe everything we do can be an act of worship.

Paul tells the Roman believers to lay down their whole lives in worship.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to *offer your bodies as a living sacrifice*, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.” (Romans 12:1)

Wow! That is a high stakes call to worship! I am not sure if this call to worship seems better or worse than God’s command to the Israelites to offer animal sacrifices to Him in worship. Our *whole* selves?! I certainly have a long ways to go to worship God that wholly.

What would it look like for you to give your whole life as worship to God?

WHAT AREAS of your life would have to change drastically for that to be true?

Is there any part of your life that you find particularly difficult to offer to God as a sacrifice? What is it?

Today's Activity

What are some ways you can attribute worth to God with your time, money, skills, and resources? List some specific ways you can give to God in each of those areas.

Prayer

God, please transform us into people who worship you with our whole lives. Help us to use our time, skills, resources, and money to attribute worth to You more than to anything else. Help us to see you as our most prized possession, better than anything this world can offer. God, teach us how to live our days as a *living sacrifice* to you. Teach us to worship you in spirit and in truth. Give us hearts to worship and show us what practices to do as we seek to attribute worth to who you. Amen.

WHEN LIFE LEAVES YOU WANTING PT. 1

DAY SIX

“Desire Gives Birth to Sin”

Have you ever felt like God has you stuck between a rock and a hard place? Like the circumstances you are in are just too much for you to bear, and He’s not coming through with a way out or a better way? And in the midst of that rock and a hard place, have you ever fallen into sin in your efforts to create your own peace and joy out of a bad situation? I am sad to say, I have. Today’s devotion is for those of us who have ever been broken-hearted and felt absolutely stuck. Some of you may be tracking with me completely. Others of you may feel more removed from some of these feelings of pain, grief, frustration, and “stuck”-ness. But I suspect that if you have been on this earth for very many years, you have experienced these feelings to some degree. Stick this one out with me. Today we are going to get down to the nitty gritty. It might not be pretty, but I have hope that God has something for us, even in the midst of feeling stuck and confessing our sin.

Queen Abijah, a character from *Isaiah's Daughter*, felt similarly afflicted as to what I just described. She felt stuck, lonely, and in pain, and she was desperate for a way out. Listen to these scenes from her life story. Her scars are real. Maybe they mirror the ones on our own hearts...

"YAHWEH HAS DONE nothing to help me, and my abba is no longer high priest. So, you see, no power on heaven or earth will intervene for me."

...Isaiah held her gaze, saw the utter hopelessness, and offered the only way out. "Yahweh has not forgotten you, Abijah."

"Well, I have forgotten him."

"Did Yahweh see what just happened to us, Zibah? Does He love you more than my loyal guard? Is that why he'll die and you'll live?...Why must good people suffer for the sins of the wicked?"

We clung to each other in this chamber of questions. My trembling eased as I prayed, hers didn't. "I don't understand everything either, my queen. All I know is the peace I feel when I remember Yahweh is near, and He is constant."

I felt her stiffen. She sniffed and pulled away. The pretend smile reappeared as she stood, still wincing at her broken ribs. "It's settled then, Zibah. You believe Yahweh loves you, and I will keep sewing my tapestry until I can stand it no longer."

"I began worshiping Asherah after Ahaz killed Bocheru. She was the mother goddess who understood my pain. She is sympathetic to a woman's tears, Zibah."

I shook the statue in front of her. "She is a piece of rock, Abijah! Trampled underfoot for centuries before a merchant chiseled her into something he could sell for profit."

"You don't understand." The Gevirah's condescending smile

was infuriating. “To enjoy the companionship of a female goddess is beyond any comfort I received from the stiff rules and rituals of Yahweh. Yahweh demands blood. Asherah offers pleasure.”

“Everything I’ve done was to survive.”

“No, Ima. No!...You have everything you could want or need.”

“I want love, Hezil I need love!” She shouted into his face, and tears finally came. “I’ve never been loved....Asherah speaks to me. She comforts me, and I feel loved while worshipping her.”

ABIJAH’S raw emotions uncover something we must address. Let’s talk about blaming God.

The psalmist writes that God withholds:

“no good thing...from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11).

James writes to believers in trial that:

“every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” (James 1:17)

He also tells us that when we are tempted:

“no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” (James 1:13)

Instead, he says *we* are the ones to blame for our sin. We are:

“dragged away by [our] own evil desire and enticed,” and

then “after [our] desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.”
(James 1:14-15)

Although it may be scary to confess our sin to God and lay ourselves bare before Him, the Bible tells us that it should be a regular part of our walk with God. The writer of Hebrews tells his readers to expect discipline from God. He says, “do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” (Hebrews 12:5b-6) He goes on to say that the Lord’s discipline is the way we know we are his legitimate children, for even earthly fathers discipline their children, and we commend them for it. “How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.” (Hebrews 12:9b-10) Wow! In order that we may share in His holiness! God’s purpose in our lives, from the very first moment we surrender to Him, is to make us holy. And this will include regular habits of confession, surrender, and discipline. Jesus told His disciples that the role of the Spirit would be to convict them and remind them of all He had spoken, and to guide them into all truth. Part of the Spirit’s job for us is to show us when and where we are off-track. This is a gift to us! John writes that “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:8-9) Friends, there is great hope for us in confession. God brings us to it for our good and His glory. Confession is our simple antidote for the selfishness, pride, greed, sin, and idol worship we find ourselves in on any given day or season of life. In confession and repentance we acknowledge the

sin that lives in us, and we confess it to God as sin. We no longer call it something else - our right, what we deserve, what we need, what we can't live without - we call it what God calls it...sin. And when we do that, He makes us new. He offers forgiveness and newness. It really is that simple. Simple, but not always easy.

Questions

If you are honest, is there anything your heart cries out for like Abijah's heart cries for love? Is there anything you feel you have been cheated out of or denied? Write it down.

WE ALSO SEE Queen Abijah grieving her son's death, and not knowing where to turn. This pain shapes her life and her decisions for many years to come. Is there any deep pain or grief in your life that you have been holding onto, perhaps for many years? Write it down here.

ABIJAH'S GRIEF and pain is deep and very real, but she uses it as reason to prove that God does not care about her and as a reason to seek pleasure in worshipping something else. As you have been seeking after your heart's desires or trying to fill a void left by pain, are there any ways you have been sinning (big or small) in your pursuits?

HERE'S A TOUGH QUESTION: Are you ever tempted to blame God or someone else for your sin? Who or what do you tend to blame?

JAMES SAYS we are “dragged away by [our] own evil desire and enticed” and that “after [our] desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.” Are there any particular desires of yours that you feel are pulling or pushing you around, “dragging you away”? Is there any one desire, or category of desires (health, love, safety, success, sex, money, power, etc.) that tends to be the culprit of conceiving and birthing sin in your life?

IF YOU HAD a hard time with Question #3 (asking you to examine your life for areas of sin), take another look at it now and ask God to help you confess, knowing that it is a part of God’s grace and gift to you to bring confession, conviction, and repentance.

Today’s Activity

While the desires of our hearts are not inherently bad - desires for health, love, security, success, happiness, etc. - they can lead us astray when they begin to control us or when we do not trust God to meet our those needs or give us something better than what we hoped for. If there is a particular desire that continues to take control of your life and cause you to sin, confess it to God now and ask Him to help you to trust Him for it. If you have been blaming God for your sinful state, join me now in confessing that to Him as well.

The Bible gives us hope in confession. We can take heart that:

“God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness” (Hebrews 12:10) and

“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will

forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
(1 John 1:9)

Forgiveness, newness, holiness, and righteousness. This is what God has for us on the other side of confession.

Spend some time in prayer today confessing to God the ways you have been seeking things other than Him. Consider making a regular habit of confession in your life. You can use the questions from today's devotion as a guide. For today, read back through the questions above and the answers you wrote down. Confess these things to God. Ask Him how He feels about each of these areas of your life. Ask Him for godly sorrow that brings repentance and leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10).

Remember, God is not the one who tempts us. Our desires get out of control and they lead us astray. Ask God to purify your desires and make them like His desires: righteous, holy, and true, not self-serving or self-indulgent.

Write down your confession, your prayers, and what God might be speaking to you.

Prayer

God, please forgive us for the ways we have been seeking to fulfill our desires apart from you. Please open our clenched fists and remove our idols of pleasure and comfort. Lord, please meet us in our pain and grief, and help us to know you are near to us. Make the hope of your forgiveness and purification real to us. Lord, give us courage to confess. Help us to see our desires and our actions the way you see them. Help us to see our sins accurately. Holy Spirit, convict us and give us godly sorrow that leads to repentance and salvation. God, bring our wayward hearts back to you. Amen.

WHEN LIFE LEAVES YOU WANTING PT. 2

DAY SEVEN

“Seek Me with All Your Heart”

Today we focus on the flip side of what to do when life leaves us wanting, when we're broken-hearted, hurting, lonely and stuck. One option is to blame God and take matters into our own hands, which tends to lead us to idol worship and sin. Another option is to run after Him all the more.

Our friend Zibah, from *Isaiah's Daughter* is no stranger to pain and grief. She has lived there for many years, growing weary and hopeless. Her heart yearns for certain gifts and blessings that she may never experience. And for a while, her heart hardens toward God. But something changes for Zibah when she turns and begins to run back to God, seeking Him with all of her might...

FACING THE OPEN BALCONY, I read the last of Abba's scrolls. I'd begun reading them as a distraction, but they quickly became my life and breath. I scoured every prophecy, copied them, and

tried to give them some semblance of order. Not necessarily chronological—as to the time they were received or delivered—but an order that presented the picture of Yahweh’s faithfulness amid His people’s rebellion, for that was Israel’s story. Judah’s story. My story.

Though I had not openly rebelled with pagan worship, I had set up my own unseen idols, allowing my pursuit of a home and peace to steal my attention from the One Source who could truly give me both. Abba’s words—Yahweh’s words—had refocused my heart and mind on the eternal. I’d learned that the absolute peace I yearned for could only be found in my eternal home, but as I immersed myself in Yahweh’s words, the tender peace of His presence made this life bearable.

I heard a dove’s coo, and closed my eyes for a moment, blocking out everything else. The sound drew me. I would visit the dovecote today. Pray. Ask Yahweh why we suffer in this life. Then refocus on eternity—for the hundredth time.

Yahweh, give me the will to trust when my faith fails so I can lean into You till the answer comes.

HONESTLY, I am amazed when I see this example of faithfulness amidst trial. Although Zibah did not fall to worshipping idols of wood and stone like Queen Abijah, she admits that her heart was definitely holding out on God, setting up idols of peace and home. So what turned her heart back towards God? What can turn your heart and my heart back towards God when we find ourselves stuck and frustrated, with hearts growing hard and bitter?

I don’t know about you, but when I read verses like “we rejoice in our sufferings” or “consider it pure joy, brothers, when you face trials of many kinds” my heart kind of clenches within me. I feel so far from being able to incorpo-

rate those concepts as realities in my life. Rejoicing in suffering? Considering trials as pure joy? Honestly, these verses sound a little crazy to me. Completely counter-intuitive. And then in other Scriptures we read of Christ's example, who "for the joy set before him endured the cross." This is the Savior we worship, and into whose likeness we are being made. Well, I don't know about you, but it seems that God has His work cut out for Him to form that kind of image in me. But recently, one way He has worked in my heart towards these ends is through the practice of gratitude. In times that I feel stuck, wanting, lacking, frustrated, and hurting, giving thanks is often the antidote I need for turning my heart from sorrow to joy.

Jesus told His disciples not to worry about what they would eat or drink or wear, but instead to trust in God, who knows what we need and delights to give it to us. He said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:29-34)

When we are stuck in wanting, it can be easy to believe that God doesn't care about us. He doesn't care about your job, your marriage, your family, your heart, your self-image, your bank account, your respect, etc. But did you catch what Jesus said? Our Father *knows* what we need, and He is *pleased* to give us the kingdom.

Questions

Have you ever experienced a time in your walk with God when you could feel His presence and His peace extremely

near to you? How did that feel? What words would you use to describe that time?

READING the Scriptures and prayer were two of the spiritual practices that turned Zibah's heart back towards God, kept her connected to Him, and helped her feel His peace. What are some of your favorite ways to connect to God?

AS YOU REFLECT on the times when you have felt extremely near to God, were there any particular spiritual habits or disciplines you were practicing at that time that helped you feel His presence closely?

TAKE a look at your life for evidences that your Father *knows* your needs and provides for you. What are some good things God had given you?

WHAT DO you think it means that He has been "pleased to give you the kingdom"? Can you think of any good gifts of His Kingdom that He has given you?

Today's Activity

"Then you will call upon me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will

bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:12-14)

God speaks this promise to His people, Israel, through the prophet Jeremiah on the heels of a promise of upcoming exile for the people. Although things will be very difficult for them very soon, God wants to assure them that He is ready to be found by them, and He will be found. I think this promise and principle holds true for us today. Our God is ready to be found by us, no matter what wilderness or exiled land we may find ourselves in spiritually. He stands ready to be found by us, and when we seek Him we most certainly will see who He is.

What are some ways you can plan to seek God today or this week? Even if you feel absolutely stuck or in a spiritual dry place, write down at least one spiritual discipline you will plan to practice today. It can be anything from reading Scripture to watching a devotional video. Maybe scheduled prayer or a discipline of service or celebration. Make a plan for one or two of these spiritual practices that you'll engage in this week.

Prayer

Although Bible passages about rejoicing in suffering leave me feeling a little unsettled, they're still important to read and consider. They are the Word of God, after all. In my own [Lyndsey's] personal Bible study recently, I have found the passage below to be a great encouragement and comfort. It reminds me that our rejoicing is not in our circumstances...

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:3-9).

Praise God that the salvation He bought for us is imperishable, undefiled and unfading! He is keeping it in heaven for us, and keeping us for Himself. Praise God that He loves us enough to reconcile us to Himself, take all our suffering upon Himself, and bring us to His side!

God please create hearts of gratitude in us. Help us to remember you each day. Remind us of your great faithfulness, and of the many ways you have shown yourself to us in the past. Help us to invest our time and energy in seeking you each day, that we might grow nearer and nearer to you. Lord, make us people who walk faithfully with you through all the ups and downs of life. Amen.

ONGOING ACTIVITY

It seems gratitude has a lot to do with remembrance. Intentionally remembering. Intentionally remembering *good*. I have always been struck by the commands God gave to His people for remembering who He was. In one instance He tells them:

“These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

The Lord knew that His people would be prone to forgetting Him and His goodness. He knew they needed regular reminders. It is no different with us today. Although I have walked with the Lord for many years, and seen His faithfulness time and time again, I still falter and fail when

hard times come. I am still prone to forgetting His goodness and His faithfulness to me. Why did Zibah turn back to the prophecies of God and to prayer after so long of feeling hard hearted toward Him? Perhaps she merely began reading as a distraction for her pain, but maybe there was something in her that nagged, “Remember....Remember His faithfulness.” Maybe when we are stuck, we can practice remembering as a path toward hope and peace.



Take some time to write a list of 50 good gifts from God for which you are thankful. Put this list somewhere where you can see it regularly - in your wallet, on your fridge, in your Bible, on the bathroom mirror, etc. See if you can add at least one new thing to this list each week or each month.



Even if you feel like you have been cheated out of life's best or given the “short end of the stick,” each one of us has something for which we can be thankful. When life gives you more than you can handle, and you are tempted to become bitter towards God or others, pull out this list, go to your knees, and spend some time in humble praise of your Almighty Creator and Provider, who made you and sustains you with life and breath each day.

ALSO BY MESU ANDREWS

Isaiah's Daughter

Miriam

The Pharaoh's Daughter

