

WEEK 6: EXERCISE #1

Even mature followers of Jesus will sometimes struggle with “letting go and letting God.” We are conditioned to default to spirits of fear and doubt rather than rising to the level of faith and trust.

Read Matthew 14:22–33.

As you read this story, make note of all the sights, sounds, tastes, textures, and smells you encounter. Note, too, any emotions described. How would you describe Jesus in this story (calm and detached? Actively engaged? Or . . .)? How would you describe the disciples? Keep in mind that they’ve just come away from a very intense season. They are grieving the loss of John the Baptist and have accomplished the enormous task of feeding five thousand people. They must be exhausted.

The disciples of Jesus often found themselves in the same boat, both literally and figuratively. As a group, they were often reduced to petty competitions or lapses of faith. This story is no exception. With wind and waves battering their boat, they are anxious. Their anxiety turns to terror when they see Jesus walking toward them on the water. Peter stands out as one who wants to trust what he sees. In fact, he wants to follow Jesus into this miracle of faith.

If you were just meeting Peter for the first time in this story, how would you describe him?

As Jesus walks toward them, He “immediately” calms their fears. Peter challenges the situation, asking Jesus to call him out of the boat. It is

tempting to focus on Peter's doubt and the fears that caused him to sink. But before we judge too harshly, we must acknowledge that at least he got out of the boat. Even if for a few wobbly steps, Peter—a mere mortal—actually walked on water! That's faith!

If you'd been there, which disciple would you most likely have been? Are you the anxious type, looking for signs that the looming storm might pass? Are you the guy on deck, looking for what you can do or how you can control the situation? Or are you the bold one, looking beyond the boat for where Jesus might be? Are you one who looks to Jesus with trust, or with questions?

Are you Peter, asking Jesus to call you out of the boat? What do you notice about Jesus' response in this Scripture passage?

Read Psalm 46.

Experience this psalm with all your senses—noting sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures.

As with our story in Matthew 14, this psalm begins with a storm (“its waters roar and foam”) and ends with calm (“Be still, and know that I am God”). What promises do you hear in this psalm?

What instructions do you receive from it for dealing with the storms of life?

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Be still, and know that I am God.

—*Psalm 46:10*

Let's make a list. On one side of the page write, "Is this a place where God has me waiting on HIM?" On the other side write "Is this the place where God is waiting on ME?"

Say, for instance, you are discerning your future in your current job. Maybe there are strained office relationships, financial concerns, opportunities to advance, job responsibilities you don't like, or ones you might want to take on. With each element of your situation, ask, "Is this a place where God has me waiting on Him? Or is this a place where God is waiting on me?"

Sit comfortably for a few moments, calming your spirit before the Lord. With your list before you, begin to transform it into a prayer of confession and hope. In what areas of your life do you need to trust the Lord completely with His plan as you wait on Him? In what areas do you need to step out of the boat?

WEEK 6: EXERCISE #2

Read Psalm 116:1–7 and Psalm 118:1–7.

Our most basic need as humans is to know we've been heard. The Psalms teach us that when we talk to Him, God listens.

Compare these two passages. What ideas or words are repeated? In three words or less, what is the main theme of the passage from Psalm 116? What is the main theme of the passage in Psalm 118? What has the writer learned about God? What do these passages say about this writer's relationship to God? About his prayer life?

Martin Luther said, "Whoever prays the Psalms earnestly and regularly will soon stop those other light and personal little devotional prayers and say: Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalms."

John Wesley said there is so much of Christ in the Psalms. They bring us into communion with God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said the Psalms are the voice of Jesus showing us how to pray. They show us that prayer is not about getting all the "thee's" and "thou's" in the right place, but about being honest with God. The Psalms are our assurance that our conversations with God—even the most raw and real ones—are heard by Him.

The writer of the book of Revelation enforces this point in his picture of life around the throne of God. In Revelation 5:8, we are shown the company of spiritual beings surrounding the throne, worshipping God. In the midst of the praise and worship are a series of bowls made of pure gold. The text tells us these bowls collect the prayers of the people. When our

prayers fall into these bowls, they mix with fire (a biblical image for the power of God) and become like incense that fills the air around God. God is always with us, God is always surrounded by our prayers, always aware of what is being prayed.

Think about that for a minute. You know how we sometimes say, “It doesn’t feel like my prayers are going any further than the ceiling”? Well, according to what the prophet John saw in his revelation, that’s simply not true. Those are feelings, not fact—much like the disciples’ feelings as they weathered their storm.

Our prayers are precious, every one of them. Right now, they are being collected in golden bowls, mixing with the power of God and at the right time, God will tip those bowls and pour His power and our prayers over the earth.

He hears us. Do you believe that? God hears you. Even if you don’t feel like anything is happening in the natural world when you pray, in the spiritual realm, in the presence of God, your prayers are collecting, and at the right time God will pour out His response.

Encounter

My heart has heard you say, “Come and talk with me.”

And my heart responds, “LORD, I am coming.” —Psalm 27:8 (NLT)

GOD, come close. Come quickly! Open your ears—it’s my voice you’re hearing!

Treat my prayer as sweet incense rising; my raised hands are my evening prayers.

—Psalm 141:1–2 (THE MESSAGE)

Using Psalm 91 as your guide, write a prayer to God expressing your deepest needs, your most difficult battles, and your most heartfelt praise. Write in psalm-form, then offer this prayer to God, visualizing Him receiving it as fragrant incense.

WEEK 6: EXERCISE #3

Nothing is more exhilarating than flying through the air on a zip line, high above trees or a river. To reap the joy of that experience, though, requires jumping into thin air. And jumping requires absolute trust in the rope that attaches the harness to the wire. Until that vertical connection is secure, it would be crazy to take that leap.

In the same way, when our vertical relationship is secure (human to God), it is a lot easier to leap into healthy horizontal relationships (human to human). Our trust must be rooted in God in order for our horizontal relationships to be healthy. If we have not resolved within ourselves that God can be trusted—that He is good, He is for us, and He is just—we will struggle in every area of life.

Read Matthew 25:14–30.

Who are the main players in this story? What is going on, exactly? After reading through the story, summarize it in your own words.

This is a story about trust. On the one hand is a guy who probably hasn't always treated the people around him with a lot of love and compassion. On the other hand is a servant who probably doesn't have a great track record of trusting people. His fellow servants managed to think the best of their master, but he wasn't able to make decisions from a place of trust. He learned the hard way that a lack of trust can sabotage our relationships and opportunities.

When we enter into relationships from a place of suspicion rather than trust, we will struggle to make progress toward building healthy sustainable, enjoyable relationships. It begins with us.

In this story, with whom do you identify most? Why?

Imagine you are the lawyer in charge of trying the case between the unjust manager and his servant. Make a case arguing first in defense of the unjust manager, and then in defense of the servant.

Trust is one way to cultivate the soil of our spiritual life. Trust breaks up hard soil and creates a better environment for growth. The Lord wants us to continue to grow in our relationship with Him, and it requires trusting Him with our whole heart.

Look again at the story of the unjust manager and lazy servant. How could the servant have built trust in this relationship, rather than acting on his distrust? What one thing could you do right now to act on your trust in God, rather than on distrust or doubt? What practical acts of trust could you try out in your closest relationships? Pray into this, and pick three practical things you could do this week to intentionally build trust and break up the hard soil of a vertical or horizontal relationship.

Encounter

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

—Proverbs 3:5–6

Trust God. It sounds so simple, yet it is the most profound thing we do. In the wilderness of hard times, in hard or rocky soil, God desires even then to forge a relationship of trust.

Do you trust God? Can you turn to Him in your confusion, weariness, and pain, trusting He'll be there to hear you and that He cares? Journal on these questions.

Take a few moments now and turn toward God. Cry out to Him honestly with all your heart, believing He hears and trusting He will provide, even if you do not know what to ask for.

Read Romans 8:26. In this place of prayer, allow the Spirit of God to pray for you, voicing before God even the things you don't know how to ask for. Try to simply be in God's presence without words, trusting the Holy Spirit to speak for you in this moment.

WEEK 6: EXERCISE #4

You know the old saying: “Sometimes big things come in small packages.” Both the parables and their subject matter in Luke 13:18–21 fit that saying. To drop a little seed into the soil of a big field doesn’t seem like much of an accomplishment. To knead the dough required for a days’ worth of bread is hardly worth talking about. A mustard seed and a little yeast. Small things. Surprising results.

By the time we read these little parables, Jesus has been traveling the countryside engaging in a countless series of small encounters with ordinary people. He has had conversations over meals. He has shared stories about God. He has gathered a few friends. Small things, surprising results.

Jesus knows what’s ahead. From these seemingly insignificant encounters, the Kingdom of God is being planted into the earth. His followers will continue to work the message into every opportunity, until one day every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Small beginnings. Big results.

Read Luke 13:18–19.

Jesus asks a question (underline it in your Bible). Then, before anyone can answer, He proceeds to share a lesson. He knows His hearers have an expectation of what it will be like when the Messiah comes to claim His Kingdom. They expect a king who will give them freedom. They are looking for a warrior who will defeat the Romans and restore Israel to its former glory. They expect a great takeover. But this is not how the Kingdom of

God is designed to work, so before anyone can utter a word, Jesus answers His own question.

This is how something small can have a great impact. It is planted quietly, like a seed. It is worked into the culture slowly, like a woman kneading bread. The mark of a Kingdom thing is not speed or great size. The mark of a Kingdom thing is that it grows.

Given that definition, where do you see the Kingdom at work in the garden of your life? Where do you see progress in your spiritual life, in your relationships, in your service to others? How is your life bearing fruit, however slowly, for the Kingdom of God?

Read Luke 13:20–21.

Again Jesus asks a question (underline this one too).

Whenever something is repeated in Scripture, it is worth noticing. Repetition is a way of emphasizing something important. Clearly, Jesus wants us to understand the Kingdom of God. When Jesus preached and taught, that was most often His subject. When He sent His followers out into surrounding villages, He charged them to drive out demons, cure disease, proclaim the Kingdom of God, and heal the sick (Luke 9:1).

Jesus wants us to understand the nature of God's Kingdom. But not only *understand* it. He wants the Kingdom of God to *invade* us, like a plant taking over a garden or yeast working through dough. Jesus wants the Kingdom of God to come to bear on our lives, to change us, to make our small lives significant!

Compare your life ten years ago with your life now. Whether or not you were a follower of Jesus ten years ago, your life has surely changed. Make some notes in your journal. How has knowing Jesus changed your life? Has it made a difference in the choices you make, the company you keep, the habits you've formed? As more and more of Jesus has gained access to more and more of you, what impact has the Kingdom of God made on the living of your life?

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A testimony is presentation of evidence in support of the truth. In Christian terms, a testimony is an opportunity to point to the truth of Jesus.

In the two parables we've just studied, Jesus has taught us that a lot can be said in just a few words. Our testimonies don't always have to be life stories. Sometimes they can be as simple as sharing how the presence of Jesus changed a situation, or changed our perspective. It can be as simple as saying, "Here's where I was in this situation. Here's what happened when Jesus showed up. Here's how it turned out." Learning to interpret life through the lens of encounters with Jesus can completely change our perspective and it can encourage others around us.

Take time now to jot down a few events in your journal that were impacted by the presence of Jesus. Maybe it was a time when . . .

- you witnessed the love of God in action and were amazed.
- you were obedient to an inner nudge to reach out to someone and it paid off.

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- you were feeling spiritually dry, then encountered God's presence in a fresh way.
- you were encouraged by someone's comment when you were growing in your faith.
- someone showed up at just the right time with just the right words.

Journal one or more of these experiences, using the pattern mentioned above ("Here's where I was in this situation. Here's what happened when Jesus showed up. Here's how it turned out.").

Now pray for an opportunity to share the Kingdom of God and "plant" one of these seeds into someone's life as a way of encouraging them.

WEEK 6: EXERCISE #5

How many church people does it take to change a lightbulb?

Change?! What do you mean change? My grandmother gave that lightbulb!

For average church people, change can be a four-letter word. We like the thought of going somewhere spiritually but not if it requires us to get outside our comfort zones. And yet, the call of Christ is to come and die, to change, to be transformed. And transformational growth usually happens not in times of comfort and ease but when trials and temptations are the greatest.

Read Exodus 14.

As you read through this part of the story of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, ask the basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why?

Who are the main players in the story? What were they doing? What was their role in the story? Where were they? Why were they there?

The Israelites were a fickle people. They loved God, but often found themselves battling their own selfish desires and fears. When they found themselves at the edge of the Red Sea with an army at their back, they complained like crazy.

They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the

Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

—Exodus 14:11–12

Over and over, they allowed doubt, fear, and pure selfishness to drive their responses to the challenges of life in the desert. And it was their poor responses (not God’s bad directions!) that left them wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

Write the text of verses 13 and 14 in your journal. Take a few moments to meditate on these verses. What do you learn about God from these verses? What do you learn about the Israelites? What do you learn about God’s relationship to the Israelites?

Life happens to all of us. As the Bible says, the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. We don’t get to choose all our circumstances, but we do get to choose how we respond to life. And how we respond probably says more about our relationship to God than most anything else.

What do your responses to life say about your relationship to God these days?

What do your prayers say about your relationship to God?

Read Galatians 5:16–26; Philippians 1:3–6; and Luke 1:37.

Paul teaches us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. The first thing on that list is love. The primary mark of the Holy Spirit is a supernatural ability to love, and in fact to love so much that we are not offended by those

around us but instead are driven to share the love of Christ with them. To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be so filled with compassion that all we really want is the other person's joy.

For the Spirit-filled Christian, that's what it means to be fruitful. The real power of the Holy Spirit is love that works itself out in practical acts of witness and compassion.

Where in your life is the fruit of the Holy Spirit evident?

God's desire is to invade our lives, to transform us from the inside out. The goal is that we look less like the person we have been and more like the Christ we follow. It begins with a choice, and it results in the kind of fruit that gives witness to the Kingdom among us.

Encounter

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

—Galatians 5:22–23

In your journal, make a vertical list of the fruits listed above, with space between each word. This list is the foundation of this time of prayer and meditation. Focusing on one word at a time, ask Jesus to show you how you are displaying this character trait of a follower in your everyday life. "Lord, where is evidence of Your love shining through me?" As the Lord reveals situations to you, make notes beside the word.

Now, ask God to show you where in your life you are not displaying this trait of a follower. “Lord, where am I falling short of Your best when it comes to actively loving others?” Again, make notes.

As you move through the list of nine “fruit of the Spirit,” continue asking questions like those above. Be intentional about noting both those places in your life you can celebrate as well as those places that need prayer and practice.

As you come to end of this meditation and prayer practice, thank God for grace!