

WEEK 7: EXERCISE #1

Read Deuteronomy 5:1–22; Matthew 5:17–20; Mark 12:28–34; and Romans 6:14.

Read these Scriptures through the filter of the Spirit of Jesus. With each passage, ask, “What does this passage *say*? What does this passage *mean*? What does this passage mean *to me*?”

Now, create a large box on your journal page (big enough to make notes on the inside, but with room to write around the edges). Around the outside of the box (outside the lines that make the box), write a summary version of the Ten Commandments, as you find them listed in Deuteronomy 5:1–22. On the inside of the box, write what you hear Jesus saying about these commandments from the New Testament Scriptures you’ve just read.

Do any of the commandments or laws stand out for you as particularly relevant? Are there any that don’t seem important to you? Why?

Consider your own faith journey in light of this graphic. What healthy boundaries are keeping you inside the pasture and under the care of Jesus? What boundaries have actually set you free? Are there places in your life where you tend to focus more on the fence than the pasture?

Encounter

Draw another large box. Around the outside, list the healthy, holy boundaries that are keeping you inside the pasture and under the care of Jesus. Maybe for you it is the decision to quit an addiction, or a more healthy approach to relationships. What are the holy habits that give structure and peace to your life?

JESUS

ENCOUNTER

Now, inside the box write those things you've discovered in following Jesus that make this journey more joyful, more meaningful, than what you used to know.

The essence of the Christian faith is placing confidence in the One sent by God. Does your life reflect that kind of confidence? Do you trust God with the details of your life? What areas of your life need to be bordered with a holy discipline? In what areas of your life do you need to focus more on grace and less on rules? Continue to make notes in and around your box as you reflect on these questions.

Looking at the graphic you've just made, would you say that the life you have now is better than the one you had before you encountered Jesus?

Talk honestly to Jesus about your discoveries. Give thanks for progress made.

WEEK 7: EXERCISE #2

In our fast-paced, noisy world, the thought of being quiet and listening almost seems like an impossible task. Remember that Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Being still is an act of trust. It means trusting that He’s on the receiving end of this moment, and it means *trusting God with everything I won’t accomplish while I’m in that quiet place*. It means trusting that He loves me, and won’t condemn me if I fall asleep while I’m still.

What do we get out of stillness? In the quiet place, we encounter not only the holiness of God but the truth of our own brokenness and sin. It is a willingness to lay myself out there before God, and to let Him do the hard but good work of sanctification in my life.

Read Luke 11:1–13.

What do you observe concerning the desire of the disciples?

Make a list of “teaching points” Jesus gives on the subject of prayer.

What one thing do you learn about prayer from this reading? Or what one thing are you remembering again? What promises does Jesus mention?

Read Mark 9:2–7.

What is God’s command at the end of this scene?

What do you think God meant when He asked His disciples to “listen to [Jesus]”?

Is listening part of your prayer journey? What keeps you from the listening side of prayer? How would your prayer life change if you were to make an intentional effort to listen as much as you speak?

Encounter

Learning to hear the voice of God is a discipline that takes time and practice. In a past encounter, you were asked to spend a few minutes in quiet, listening for God. This time, let's try extending that time so that you're sitting quietly for fifteen minutes. Spend the time with pen in hand, listening for the voice of Jesus. Devote at least fifteen minutes to being present to God, still (but not asleep!), listening and journaling what you hear.

Trust what you hear in that place of prayer and write it down, believing God has both the power and the desire to speak into our lives. This is God praying through us, and this is how most of the Bible was written. It was written by faithful people who wrote while they listened.

Close your prayer time by reflecting on one verse from the following options: Psalm 23; Numbers 27:16–17; Isaiah 53:6.

WEEK 7: EXERCISE #3

Before moving forward with this exercise, review your journal notes from week three, during which we studied John 9. In the lessons of that week, we talked about how Jesus transforms our hearts and lives. John 9 provides the “backstory” for the chapter we are about to study.

Read John 10.

The story of the Good Shepherd in John 10 begins with the blindness of the Pharisees. Spiritual blindness seems to characterize the whole community, and especially the spiritual leadership.

Darkness in the spiritual life is not always a bad thing. St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) in *Dark Night of the Soul* talked about a season in the life of any serious follower of Jesus that feels very much like a “wall” to a runner. Some people call this a crisis of faith. It is a place on the spiritual journey where we have to consciously decide to choose Jesus in areas of our life we haven’t given to Him yet. On the other side of a dark night, we experience a deeper hunger for God than we’ve known before.

God may sometimes walk us through a valley or a dark night. The enemy uses darkness too. Job mentions thieves and evildoers who hide in the dark.

Dr. Timothy Laniak writes:

One of the many words Job uses for darkness is tsalmavet, found ten times throughout the book. This graphic compound term can be translated

“shadow of death” or “deadly darkness.” We’re familiar with the phrase in The Shepherd Psalm: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” Here the psalmist is unafraid to walk through the valley of tsalmavet because the Lord accompanies him. This valley symbolizes life’s hazardous transitions—occasions when the Shepherd Guide could be trusted without the illumination of daylight.⁷

In Isaiah 9:2 we are promised that the people who walk in darkness will see a great light and that the light will shine on those who live in death’s shadow. There is great hope in that promise. If we are experiencing a time of spiritual confusion or a “dark night of the soul,” the Light will eventually come. He will not leave us in the dark.

Read Luke 22:53; Luke 23:44–46; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; and Job 12:22.

How would you describe the darkness in each of these Scriptures?

What gives you hope in the darkness? Have you experienced a crisis of faith, or a “dark night of the soul”? What truth or grace carried you through that time?

What story from Scripture speaks most deeply in your dark times?

Encounter

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

—Matthew 5:6

Times of trial and sacrifice are often paths to a greater hunger for God. Spiritual disciplines like fasting also create a great hunger for God.

Fasting is a prime opportunity to build trust in God, and it is a normal part of what it means to follow Jesus. Fasting is a biblical principle. There is nothing like it to break strongholds and release spiritual power into our lives.

Fasting is a way we can live what Jesus taught. It creates humility in us, which is a defining character trait of Jesus. And it gets our hearts ready for the next thing God has for us. Fasting makes us hungry to *live this*.

If your physical health allows, pick a meal—preferably today—and fast from eating for that meal. Spend the time instead roaming through your Bible looking for passages on hunger. Journal what you find. Then spend some time meditating on Matthew 5:6. Do you hunger and thirst for God? Close in prayer, asking God to give you a greater hunger for the things of His Kingdom.

WEEK 7: EXERCISE #4

As a child, were you a climber? Some of us loved the challenge of a sturdy tree, a tall fence, or a concrete ledge. We'd rather climb over a thing than go around it. But as adults, most of us would rather find the gate than climb the fence. When Jesus calls Himself "the gate," He's appealing to the adult in us who understands there is a hard way to get things done and an easy way. To enter into relationship with Jesus is to take the better option.

Read John 10:1–6.

After leaving his sheep in a safe place for the night, the shepherd now comes to the gate to lead them out. Since there are other flocks gathered there in the same pen, the shepherd calls to his sheep so they'll hear his voice. The relationship between sheep and shepherd is intimate. The shepherd knows his sheep. Sheep know to whom they belong. The shepherd cares for them and keeps illness and enemy at bay.

The average life span of a sheep is ten to twelve years. Over that time, consider how often the shepherd counts, checks, carries, nurses back to health, rescues, protects, feeds, shears, leads, and calls out to his sheep. No wonder they are considered part of the family.

A troubled lamb—one struggling to get along in the flock—would be relegated to the shepherd's shoulder, where it would be carried and talked to for long stretches of time. The point was for the lamb to learn the shepherd's voice.

Read Psalm 23.

The usual place of a shepherd is behind or beside his flock. But in the wilderness and unfamiliar territory, sheep need guidance and strong leadership to feel safe. In those situations, the shepherd is *out front* leading his flock.

In the same way, when we don't feel secure we do not feel free to function in the way God intended. Without walls, we lose direction, unity, and hope. Without walls, we tend to fade into the world around us.

How well do you know the voice of your Shepherd? Are you allowing Him to lead, guide, and direct you? How is your life influenced by the knowledge that you are known, protected, and cared for?

Do you see a link between spiritual blindness (John 9) and the shepherds and sheep (John 10)? What comparisons can you draw?

What contrasts do you see between the religious leaders in chapter 9 and the shepherd in chapter 10?

Read John 10:7–18.

Write down all the promises you find in these verses.

What do you notice about the thieves and robbers?

Thieves and robbers climb fences, motivated by greed and deception. Their plans are foiled when the sheep don't listen. In your life, what (or who) has come to steal, kill, or destroy your peace, faith, joy, obedience?

Jesus came to give us life and life to the full, abundantly, beyond measure (John 10:10; Psalm 23:5). Jesus gives. Thieves take. What things in

your life have given you joy and abundance? What things (even those that sounded like a good deal on the front end) have stolen your joy? What have you learned from those experiences?

Encounter

There are good shepherds and bad shepherds. Jesus is a *good* shepherd. A good shepherd knows His sheep by name and is willing to lay down His life for the sheep. The sheep only have to listen to the voice of the shepherd. In other words, it is not about us. It is about the shepherd.

Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. Visualize Jesus standing before you. What do you know about Him? Make a list of everything you know to be true about Jesus, and everything you are experiencing even now as He stands before you. Who is this Jesus and how is He changing your life?

Google the hymn “Be Thou My Vision,” and either print out the lyrics or listen to it online. Make this beautiful song into a prayer to the God of your life.

WEEK 7: EXERCISE #5

Read John 10:14–18 and 1 John 4:16–18.

As you read these Scriptures, focus on why the Father loves Jesus. Underline or highlight the relevant words and phrases in your Bible. What phrase in these Scriptures captures your attention? What do you learn from these verses about the connection between love and sacrifice?

Reread John 10:17.

In this verse, Jesus reveals the profound nature of His relationship with the Father. It is a relationship built on sacrifice, love, and hope. Jesus lays down His life in obedience to the Father's will. The Father loves Jesus. The hope is in the promise of overcoming death.

There is a “holy flow” of love and obedience present in a right relationship with God. The sheep follow the shepherd. The shepherd does everything in obedience to the Father. The Father loves the shepherd and the sheep.

As love and obedience flow through our relationship with God, we are made holy and we begin to experience the abundant life promised by Jesus. What happens when we stifle that “holy flow”?

Have you had the experience of being lured in by a project or idea that you knew was beyond God's cover? How did that work out for you?

Read Psalm 139.

David tells us that God knows us and that this is the foundation of our trust in Him. At the end of Psalm 139, David prays maybe the deepest

prayer of trust. He opens every door of his heart and invites God in. “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23–24).

What does it mean to draw close to God? It is about moving past a belief in God to an experience of God. He is not disgusted by our doubts or frustrated by our fears. He is not angry about our immaturity or afraid of our pain. God in His ultimate wisdom and love has chosen to know us fully. No shame. No rejection. The cross is our assurance of that.

Encounter

We are going to use Psalm 23 as a foundation for our prayer time.

First, read through this psalm in two or three translations. You can find multiple translations online at www.biblegateway.com.

Choose a translation that feels comfortable to you and read the psalm again, making it into a prayer. Use first-person language. Make it your own prayer to God.

Now, pray the prayer again, adding as many specifics into the language as you can. For instance, rather than simply saying, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” we pray instead, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want for my mortgage payment, my tuition, my car repair . . .”

Continue through the psalm, customizing it to your life. Journal as you go, making notes about how this psalm speaks into your deepest needs.

JESUS

ENCOUNTER

How does this method of prayer—using a psalm as a foundation—strengthen your understanding of God’s plan for your life? How does it help your awareness of who Jesus is for you?