



# WHOLENESS

*the path to wellness*

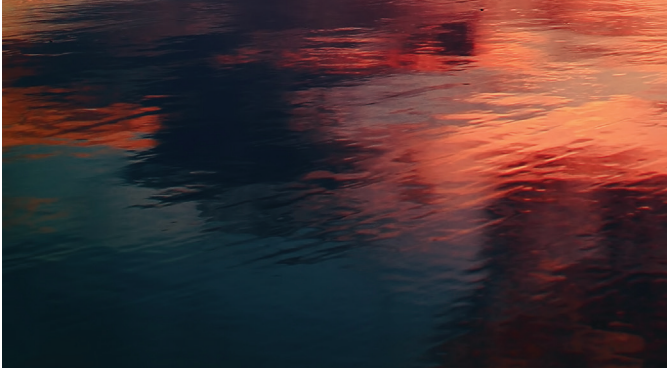
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# HEALING DEPRESSION FOR LIFE

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**FOR DECADES**, standard treatment for depression hasn't changed. Sufferers typically are prescribed antidepressant medication and talk therapy. Period. But as many as one-third of depression sufferers aren't helped by standard treatment. Instead, they are left still searching for true and lasting relief.

In *Healing Depression for Life*, Dr. Gregory L. Jantz offers a new way forward. Drawing on the innovative whole-person approach that has made his treatment center one of the top 10 depression treatment facilities in the United States, Dr. Jantz reveals the treatments, practices, and lifestyle changes that can provide lasting relief from depression—by addressing its emotional, physical, intellectual, relational, and spiritual causes.



Mental health expert **DR. GREGORY JANTZ** pioneered whole-person, holistic care. Now recognized as one of the leaders in holistic treatment, Dr. Jantz continues to identify more effective, cutting-edge forms of treatment for people struggling with eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and trauma. He is the founder of The Center: A Place of Hope, which was voted one of the top 10 facilities in the United States for the treatment of depression.

Dr. Jantz is a bestselling author of more than 37 books. He is a go-to media source for a range of behavioral-based afflictions, including drug and alcohol addictions. Dr. Jantz has appeared on CNN, FOX, ABC, and CBS and has been interviewed for the *New York Post*, *Associated Press*, *Family Circle*, and *Woman's Day*. He is also a regular contributor to *Thrive Global* and *Psychology Today* blogs. Visit [www.aplaceofhope.com](http://www.aplaceofhope.com) and [www.drgregoryjantz.com](http://www.drgregoryjantz.com).

## CHAPTER 4

# Stressed and Depressed

*How to Tame Chronic Stress and Regain Emotional Wellness*

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If someone had asked Kelley to describe the last twenty years of her life, two words would have come immediately to her mind:

*Survival mode.*

Twenty years ago, Kelley was trying to survive an emotionally abusive marriage. When she finally made the decision to leave, she became enmeshed in a grueling and bitter divorce. Then came the financial stress of trying to start a business to support herself and her three children.

Her stress continued to escalate when her ex-husband decided he needed a two-year “break” from paying child support, throwing the family further into financial disarray. Eventually, Kelley hired a family law attorney and took her ex back to court. The judge ruled in her favor, ordering the ex to begin paying child support again and providing reimbursement for the months he didn’t pay. Finally caught up on months’ worth of overdue bills, Kelley was able to stop foreclosure proceedings on her home with less than a month to spare.

By then, her youngest child was in his midteens and discovering the lure of alcohol. For three frightening years, Kelley lived on high alert as she tried desperately to get her son the help he needed, while navigating the strain of her son’s many lies and self-destructive choices.

By the time her youngest came to his senses, committed to sobriety,

and was back on the track of becoming a well-adjusted young man, Kelley felt like she was taking her first deep breath in many years.

She was grateful that—finally!—life seemed to have leveled out. Her kids were doing well. She was no longer living paycheck to paycheck. For the first time in a long time, she wasn't waking up in a panic and wondering how she was going to get through the day. Her years of living in survival mode had, at last, come to an end.

Yes, when she looked at her circumstances, she could see that something in her life had shifted dramatically for the better. She couldn't deny she had entered a new chapter of her life. The threats and dangers that had besieged her for years—an abusive husband, financial hardship, a troubled child—had finally subsided.

Still, Kelley soon realized she had little optimism about the future or enthusiasm for her improved lifestyle. Instead of embracing this new season with joy, Kelley felt herself disengaging from everyone around her. As her isolation grew, she battled increasingly negative thoughts, and her emotions continued their steady decline into what felt like an endless abyss of sadness.

## **THE SCIENCE OF STRESS**

The idea that long-term stress and depression are linked goes back many decades. Numerous research studies conclusively demonstrate the detrimental effects of prolonged stress on our emotional and physiological well-being. But you don't need to read medical journals to understand the damaging connection between stress and depression. Certainly, you have seen this dynamic at play in your own life and in the lives of people you love.

There are some commonsense reasons why stress contributes to depression. When we are stressed, we may be tempted to abandon healthy habits we typically follow. Financial stress, for example, can lead to working long hours, skipping exercise, losing sleep due to worry,



or eating fast food in the car on the way home from a late night at the office. When we forfeit proper exercise, sleep, and nutrition, we abandon three of our most powerful defenses against depression . . . and we lose three potent coping strategies for managing stress.

What's more, stress can also prompt us to seek temporary relief in unhealthy habits that create *more* stress in the long run. Turning to alcohol, comfort food, or overspending might provide temporary relief and distraction, but these things will complicate our lives and add to our stress over time.

But there's much more to this dynamic than the idea that stress tempts us to abandon good habits and pursue bad ones. Science tells us that when we experience stress—particularly ongoing, chronic stress like Kelley endured—it triggers processes within our bodies that are conducive to depression, even years after the stress or trauma occurred. Researchers are beginning to identify what these bodily processes are. What they are discovering is not only fascinating but also holds the possibility of alleviating the suffering of many people struggling with depression.

George Slavich and Michael Irwin, associated with UCLA's Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology and Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, began their quest for answers by asking the following questions:

- How does stress ramp up internal biological processes that evoke depression?
- Why is depression often accompanied by certain physical complaints, conditions, and diseases?
- Why are people with a history of early life stress at a greater risk for depression?

After analyzing more than 450 research papers, reviews, and studies on stress and depression, here's what Drs. Slavich and Irwin say is happening.

The body responds to different threats in different ways. For example, when physical injury or infection has occurred, localized inflammation is the body's signal for help. When skin or tissues are damaged, chemicals are released that increase blood flow to the area and also attract white blood cells to fight pathogens. In other words, inflammation is helping your immune system do its job.

But prolonged stress—especially stress related to interpersonal loss or rejection—triggers something called adaptive immunity, which not only increases inflammation at the sites of past trauma but also increases systemic inflammation throughout the entire body. And that's where the real problem lies.

Chronic, systemic inflammation has been linked to a variety of serious diseases, including “asthma, arthritis, diabetes, obesity, atherosclerosis, certain cancers, and Alzheimer's disease” . . . and, of course, depression.<sup>1</sup>

Professors at Rice University reviewed two hundred studies on depression and found that depression and inflammation are intertwined, feeding off each other:

This bidirectional loop, in which depression facilitates inflammatory responses and inflammation promotes depression, has clear health consequences. Heightened inflammation characterizes a number of disorders and systemic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, multiple sclerosis, chronic pain, and psoriasis; each of these also features an elevated risk for depression.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, depression caused by chronic inflammation is resistant to traditional interventions (although it does respond to yoga, biofeedback, meditation, and exercise).

## **STRESS IS ON THE RISE**

The link between prolonged stress, systemic inflammation, and major depression isn't exactly good news, particularly since the amount of stress we experience today is, according to the American Psychological Association (APA), becoming a public health crisis. In fact, APA CEO Norman Anderson, PhD, says, "America is at a critical crossroads when it comes to stress and our health."<sup>3</sup>

What's stressing us out? Money and work rank as the two top stressors, with family responsibilities coming in third. Stress levels also seem higher the younger we are, with millennials reporting the highest average levels of stress (6.0 out of 10).<sup>4</sup>

Exacerbating the situation is that advances and innovations originally promising to relieve our stress—computers, smartphones, and the Internet, for example—appear simply to add to feelings of being overwhelmed. Here's what business and technology expert Bernard Marr has to say regarding why technology escalates our stress:

Data, data everywhere. Our brains are being expected to cope with data flowing into them from all directions as our computers, smart phones and connected devices constantly beep, flash and bombard us with information. . . . Put simply, the digital technology has evolved at a far quicker rate than the physical evolution of the brains we use to decipher and put it to use. Our brains aren't built to cope with the ever increasing volumes of data we are trying to cram into them—and this is leading to brain malfunction in the form of stress.<sup>5</sup>

Even something as seemingly innocuous as checking e-mail can add to our stress. Gloria Mark, a researcher at the University of California at Irvine, made interesting discoveries about e-mail stress when she conducted a study of a group of US Army civilian employees. After giving the test subjects heart rate monitors, she measured what happened when they eliminated e-mail from their lives for five days.

After the completion of their e-mail fast, employees' heart rate monitors showed that stress levels had decreased. Participants also reported that they felt more in control of their working lives and that productivity had improved.<sup>6</sup>

And what is the impact of all this stress? Studies are showing an increase in the number of people who report feeling nervous, anxious, depressed, sad, worried, irritable, or angry over previous years.<sup>7</sup> While this is not good news, it does give us a place to begin. It gives us hope that, by managing our stress (and inflammation), we can decrease depression and create a positive difference in our mood.

## **TAKE CONTROL OF WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL**

When our team of experts meets with clients every week, they are reminded that feeling stressed and overwhelmed by the demands of life is a common denominator. Not everything that causes us stress can be eliminated—nor should it be. Low-level stress stimulates the brain to boost productivity and concentration. It can also be a big motivator to make changes, solve problems, or accomplish goals that make us better human beings and create improvements in our lives.

In addition, many sources of stress are simply beyond our control. Sometimes things happen that we could not have foreseen or avoided, such as changes in the economy, an employer declaring bankruptcy, an accident or illness, or even the decisions of other people that leave us gravely affected.

That said, there are still plenty of stressors in our lives over which

we do have control. Indeed, the elimination of stressors in this category will not only improve our lives but will also leave us healthier and happier. We are often tempted to complain about what we cannot control without ever making an effort to change or manage what we can control.

These controllable factors are the very things we ask clients to focus on, and you should focus on them in your life too. Here are seven stress-management strategies you should begin practicing immediately.

### *Stop Procrastinating*

This is a simple (though not easy) place to start. It's safe to say we all procrastinate sometimes, and for some people, procrastination is a way of life. Whether you are an occasional procrastinator or a serial procrastinator, your delays and avoidance amp up your stress levels. Naturally, the more you procrastinate, the more stressed you become.

Chances are, at this very moment, there is something in your life that is making you feel anxious . . . not because you can't change it but because you are putting off doing what you need to do to resolve that source of stress once and for all.

Why do we procrastinate in the first place? Procrastination experts Joseph Ferrari, PhD, and Timothy Pynchyl, PhD, say there are three types of procrastinators:

- “thrill-seekers,” who get a rush out of waiting to the last minute
- “avoiders,” who see procrastination as a way of sidestepping something unpleasant, like criticism or failure or even the unwanted pressure of success
- “decisional procrastinators,” who struggle to make a decision and who thus may feel absolved of responsibility for how life unfolds<sup>8</sup>

Think back on the experiences of Kelley, whom I told you about earlier. The stress she experienced over the course of two decades came from a variety of sources, both within her control and beyond it. For example, while Kelley could not control her ex-husband's decision to renege on child support, she was in control of how long she waited before taking legal action. Kelley's procrastination was driven by her desire to avoid conflict, and it multiplied her stress many times over before she finally took action and resolved the problem.

### *Limit Your Commitments*

Something else that is largely within your control to manage is how overcommitted you are. Granted, sometimes situations impose themselves on our lives and schedules, and we can find ourselves overwhelmed as a result. If we're not careful, we can grow accustomed to the feeling and continue to live in a familiar state of overload by never learning to say no.

Protecting your time from overcommitments that are within your control to refuse may not be easy, but it's arguably one of the most effective things you can do to reduce the stress in your life.

### *Forgo Temporary Escapes That Increase Your Stress*

When we are stressed, it's tempting to turn to excessive eating, spending, or alcohol consumption. That's because we want to do something to change our mood! Of course, the list of unhelpful and unhealthy escapes could go on and on. Legal and illegal substance abuse, gambling, pornography, and infidelities may help us temporarily forget about the stress of our lives but will eventually leave us even more stressed—and depressed—than ever.

I'm not saying that finding ways to escape stress is a bad thing. In fact, taking a mental and emotional break from whatever is making you feel overwhelmed is a powerful tool that can improve how you cope,

transform your perspective, and even help you identify long-term solutions. But being intentional about *how* we escape is critical, and what we choose can determine not only how long we stay stressed but how much damage we sustain in the process.

### *Embrace Healthy Escapes*

What are some examples of healthy mini-vacations? An escape could be as simple as spending an hour with an enjoyable book in a backyard hammock or as elaborate as planning a trip to a bed-and-breakfast in another state.

You can also take an hour and try something brand new. For example, drive around a part of town you're unacquainted with until you find an unfamiliar coffee shop, go inside, and order something you've never tried before.

Plan a staycation and go camping in your backyard. Spend an afternoon at a local zoo or art museum. Visit a tourist attraction in your city that you've never been to before. Taking a walk in nature is an escape that is good for your body, your emotions, and your brain. Watching a favorite comedy is another escape that won't complicate your life or add to your stress after the credits roll.

Finally, you can cultivate healthy habits that you can practice when you feel stressed (instead of turning to unhealthy habits like bingeing on comfort food). One of our clients bought a mini trampoline and placed it in a corner of her kitchen. Because stress usually sends her to the pantry, she wanted a healthier alternative where she would be sure to see it. She is trying to be intentional about replacing her chocolate habit with the much healthier habit of bouncing lightly on her rebounder for five minutes whenever she starts to feel overwhelmed.

A word of caution and challenge on this point: depressed people usually do not want to embrace healthy escapes. They don't feel like

it. These pursuits seem pointless or contrived or like too much work. Set aside justifications for doing nothing. Summon up any energy and motivation you can . . . and just do it!

### *Put an End to Isolation and Withdrawal*

When we're stressed, it's tempting to isolate. When we're already feeling overwhelmed, the last thing we want to do is expend the energy to drive to an event, have someone over, or connect with a friend after work. And yet study after study shows that supportive relationships are huge factors when it comes to improving how we experience and process stress. In fact, loneliness is linked not only to depression but also to health problems including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and cognitive decline.

It's worth noting here that involvement in a faith community may help in this regard. Studies have shown that people who are involved in faith communities tend to have lower levels of anxiety and stress. People who experience their faith with a supportive community are not only connecting with like-minded people, but they also feel more connected to God.

Therese Borchard, the founder of Project Hope & Beyond, an online community for people with depression and other mood disorders, writes,

Religion and faith provide social support, a consistent element of happiness and good health. Regular churchgoers not only get support from their community, but they also GIVE support to others, and the altruistic activity promotes better health. . . .

Faith attaches meaning to events. It gives folks hope, the ultimate stress reducer. Hope, doctors say, is about the best thing you can do for your body. It's better than a placebo.<sup>9</sup>



## *Guard Your Thoughts*

Sometimes the source of our pain and stress can be found in our own thoughts. Ruminating on negative or painful experiences, refusing to forgive, or practicing a perennially negative outlook on life can create ongoing stress. What's more, because the source of this chronic stress isn't anything external that you can point to, it can be hard to identify and change.

We all have an inner voice constantly blabbering about our faults, failures, inadequacies, and unfortunate experiences. But did you know that you control the on/off switch for that voice? It may have had its own way for so long that you'll have to work to get the controls back. But you can. Refuse to sit still for self-inflicted verbal beatings any longer, and dam the flow of negative messages coming into your brain. Replace them with positive affirmations. Accept your shortcomings and celebrate your strengths. Refuse to ruminate about past hurts, and redirect your thoughts to uplifting memories. You will take a big step toward overcoming stress by recognizing the crucial role of thoughts and self-talk in creating your life.

Try this experiment: tonight before bed, set aside a few minutes to ponder and evaluate the quality of your thoughts throughout the day. Were they generally positive and productive? Critical and judgmental? Then think of some specific ways you can harness your thoughts and make them an ally, not an enemy, of your well-being. For instance, repeat to yourself the phrase "My thoughts will change as I create and plan—and I will feel more and more hope!"

## *Take Care of Your Body*

One of the best things you can do to handle the stresses of life is to fortify your health and body. Eating right, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly relieve feelings of stress and anxiety, improve your mood, and energize your body, brain, and emotions.

A major study, for example, tracked more than a million individuals to examine the association between exercise and mental health difficulties. Individuals who exercised consistently reported significantly fewer days of poor mental health in the past month than individuals who did not exercise but were otherwise matched for several physical and sociodemographic characteristics. All exercise types were associated with a lower mental health burden.<sup>10</sup>

We will look more closely at physical factors that affect depression in part 3.



It's impossible to eliminate all stress from your life. Managing stress well, thankfully, is another story. How much stress you experience—and how you respond when you experience that stress—is something over which you have more control than you may realize.

By keeping in mind these seven stress-busting strategies, you are taking an important step in improving the quality of your life as well as reducing a significant contributor to major depressive disorder.

## **YOUR PERSONAL ACTION PLAN**

Reducing the stress in your life is not a one-time action but a series of lifestyle choices and intentional decisions. It's not something you figure out once but an attitude and a mind-set to be embraced now and for years to come.

What's the best way to get started? Begin by identifying some of the major stressors in your life. The following steps will help you begin the process.

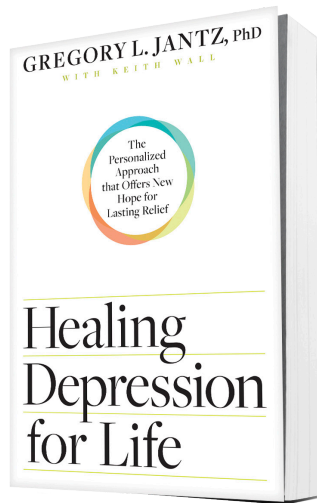
- 1. Identify key stressors.** Make a list of the factors in your life that are contributing to your stress. If possible, group these stressors into the categories we examined in this chapter:

- stressors you might be able to eliminate if you stopped procrastinating
  - overcommitment issues
  - unhealthy habits you use to escape or avoid dealing with issues in a healthy manner
  - stress in your life that is causing, or is caused by, isolation
  - unhealthy ways of thinking that are adding to your stress
  - ways you are mistreating or neglecting your body
2. **Create an action plan to incorporate some of the strategies discussed in this chapter.** Trying to make immediate changes in all seven areas examined in this chapter will only add to your stress. Instead, identify two or three areas where you would like to incorporate changes and address those. Next month, incorporate a few additional changes, and so on.
  3. **Identify a partner for accountability, encouragement, and company.** You're not the only one who is stressed. Chances are that you have friends who also would like to handle stress better. Ask someone you know to join you on this journey. Brainstorm, engage in fun stress-busting activities, hold each other accountable, and celebrate each other's successes together.
  4. **When you mess up, don't stress about it.** As you are putting your plan into action, making new choices that will empower you to handle stress better, there will be days when you fall back into old habits. Whether you binge on comfort food, say yes to too many commitments, stay up half the night watching mindless TV shows, or put off doing what you need to do to solve a stressful problem in your life, don't worry about it. Forgive yourself. Let it go. Move on.
  5. **Celebrate your successes.** As you experience successes in your efforts to reduce the stress in your life, stop and savor the

moment. Journal about the milestones in your journey—discovering a healthier way of seeing things, letting go of a grudge, improving your diet, beginning a workout program, getting to bed earlier, or tackling problems sooner rather than later.

## ENDNOTES

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Dr. Jantz knows that not all depression is the same, and not all people with depression are the same. In *Healing Depression for Life*, he will help you find the missing puzzle pieces that could make all the difference in overcoming your feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and put you on the path to lasting joy.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/healing-depression-for-life/9781496434616>

# TRY SOFTER

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**WE CAN'T SEEM TO ESCAPE** the allure of the “try harder” gospel—the message that if we just keep going, keep hustling, keep pretending everything is great, we’ll find success and happiness. But as a clinical therapist, Aundi Kolber knows firsthand where this path leads: When we try to white-knuckle our way through life, we end up overworked and overwhelmed, exhausted and numb.

There is a better way. In her debut book, *Try Softer*, Aundi shows us through the latest psychology, practical exercises, and her own story how God specifically designed our bodies and minds to work together to process our stories and overcome obstacles.



**AUNDI KOLBER** is a licensed professional counselor (LPC), writer, and speaker living in Castle Rock, Colorado. She graduated from Denver Seminary in 2008 with an MA in community counseling. Aundi is the owner of Kolber Counseling, LLC, which was established in 2009. She has received additional training in her specialization of trauma and body-centered therapies, including the highly researched and regarded eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy.

Aundi is passionate about the integration of faith and psychology, as well as its significance for the church today. She has written for *Relevant*, *CT Women*, *(in)courage*, the *Huffington Post*, *Propel Sofia*, *Happy Sonship*, and more. Aundi regularly speaks at local and national events, and she appears on podcasts such as *CXMH*, *The Upside Down Podcast*, *This Good Word with Steve Wiens*, and *Restoring the Soul*.

As a survivor of trauma and a lifelong learner, Aundi brings hard-won knowledge around the work of change, the power of redemption, and the beauty of experiencing God with us in our pain. She is happily married to her best friend, Brendan, and is the proud mom of Matia and Jude.

## CHAPTER 7

# Try Softer with Your Body

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*Becoming the Beloved means letting the  
truth of our Belovedness become enfolded  
in everything we think, say, or do.*

HENRI NOUWEN, *LIFE OF THE BELOVED*

I am twelve years old, standing in front of my smudged bedroom mirror in my green one-piece swimsuit. By anyone else's standards, my body is fine. But already I can see I am not the shape I should be. I do not have curves. I am square. Although I'm petite for my age, I pull at the skin around my stomach. *If only I had a waist*, I think. I'm already aware that a beautiful body—one that looks like those on magazine covers—earns attention and affirmation. And for now, having a beautiful body feels about as close to love as I can ever get.

So I want a different body.

I am twenty years old and a successful college basketball player who works out seven days a week. I am physically strong with tenacity buried deep in my bones. Even so, my body is not what it should be. I know this because I do not match the feminine picture of womanhood. I am not lean and lithe; I am muscular, with visible quadriceps from the hours of wall sits and defensive stances I've done during practice. I love



my body, but I hate it too. All my working out—and the guilt, the shame, the restrictive eating—none of it is giving me the willowy look others prize. If only my clothes would fit my body the way I want them to.

I want a different body.

Now I'm in my midthirties. The concrete is hot under my feet as I hold the hand of my seventeen-month-old son and walk toward the splash pad at our community pool. We have just moved to the far-out suburbs of Denver, and I notice that most of the other moms here look so put together.

I feel a bit frumpy and quite self-conscious, if I'm honest. My skin is extrawhite, and my stomach feels fleshier than I'd prefer. A part of me wants to run and cover up. After all, I don't have the post-baby body I see all over the Internet. And a part of me grieves that we women walk around as though we need to constantly audition for an advertisement we didn't know we were trying out for.

I have believed I am beloved for so long. On this day at the pool, I realize that not every part of my body knows this and believes it—still. So I will try to live out my belovedness, even here. And I *am* grateful for this body that has carried so much; for what it has accomplished and for how it has held me, loved my children, and given me access to wisdom. I've mostly found peace with my body. I do not push it in the same ways I used to. Mostly, I try to listen to it now—to pour kindness all over those parts of me that have been plagued by my own criticisms and self-doubt. I am trying to live out what I already know—my body is me.

My tiniest and I finally reach the splash pad, and I settle into my breathing. Suddenly, a thought comes to me, a deal of sorts. I make a pledge to my body: I will not participate in objectifying my body or the bodies of those around me. I will not see myself as having to please other people through my looks, and I will not put other women in a place where they have to feel that way either.

I promise not to see my body as something separate from me. As a

commodity. As something that must earn approval to be loved. Just as I am the beloved, so is my body. Just as my psyche deserves compassionate attention, so does my body. My body is me.<sup>1</sup>



So many of us were taught to fear, abhor, or disconnect from our bodies. As a result, we may mistreat or neglect them. Yet ultimately, we must learn to live in our bodies if we are to pursue wholeness and integrated lives in which we are connected to ourselves, others, and God. We must begin to listen to what our bodies are telling us about what has been done to them and what we are doing to ourselves. If we're going to try softer, we must continue our journeys of living in our bodies—being both gentle with and attentive to them. Why does this matter? Because learning to embrace our entire selves is not just a spiritual or mental endeavor—it is also an incarnational one. We must come home to ourselves.

Even now as I think about my own journey, I can recognize the shift from when I saw my body as something that existed to serve me to when I understood that it is the physical extension and expression of *me*. Viewing my body in this way is not just an idea; it must also be lived as an embodied practice. To do so, I've had to reexamine my thinking about my body and remember that it is so valuable and so loved that Jesus gave Himself for it:

Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

I CORINTHIANS 6:19-20, NLT

Since Scripture is so clear about the worth and workmanship of our bodies, why do we avoid the incarnational life?

## FUNCTIONAL GNOSTICISM

In seminary, one of the classes from which I learned the most was church history. As I was taught about many of the challenges the early church faced, I realized that in some ways, their struggles weren't that much different from our own.

One of the primary heresies of the early church was Gnosticism. Essentially, Gnosticism teaches that anything spiritual—or having to do with the soul—is holy, and anything physical is bad. As a result, many attracted to this false teaching doubted the bodily incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. Though church leaders began to refute Gnosticism in the second century, we can still see its influence in the church even today.

In truth, many parts of Gnosticism don't integrate with the Christian faith—maybe its misunderstanding of why Jesus came to earth as a human being most of all. God's plan of salvation *required* Jesus to become fully human.

When Jesus entered the world as a baby, when He chose to become fully human while he was still fully God, He showed how much He valued our humanity and that He would do anything to save us—even if it meant death on a cross. He chose to vulnerably enter the world through the womb of a teenage girl and then to live with the risks, discomforts, and pain of being human. In doing so, He demonstrated that our personhood is not simply a tool and our bodies are not merely objects.

Jesus' body didn't just serve Him; it *was* Him. Jesus was His body. And, yes, He would later suffer, die, and be buried in His body before rising and finally becoming unconstrained by human limits again. But let's not pass over His thirty-three years on earth too quickly. Let's not rush past His death and sacrifice *in His body*, because His life on earth is a love letter to an aching humanity that teaches us how to try softer.

Jesus' life on earth says, *I choose to sacrifice My body so you can honor*

*and pay compassionate attention to yours—this is the length to which I'll go to love you.* In the Gospel of Luke, He showed us the significance of His life and death at the Last Supper with His disciples: “Jesus took bread and gave thanks and broke it in pieces. He gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you. Do this to remember Me’” (22:19, NIV).

Jesus came to show us the truest, best way to be human—not by denying His humanity but by embracing it. By living in it. By dying in it. And then, finally, by being resurrected in a glorified body. Jesus loves our humanity.

And Jesus' life on earth is why we can confidently say that God values our flesh and bones. He values the tears we cry and the hearts beating within each of us. He sees the emotional and physical bruises we've suffered. Jesus is tender to our humanity. He made it; He lived in its constraints; and He loves our bodies—just as He loves us. From Him we learn that there is no hierarchy, as the Gnostics said, to the physical and spiritual. It's all sacred, dear one.

The days I birthed my children were as precious as any prayers I've prayed, if not more so. The nights I sit by my children's beds, wiping their brows and tending to their needs—this work is sacred. Breaking bread with my husband, enjoying coffee with my friends, sitting with my clients in the midst of sorrow, stringing together words as I write another sentence, walking near the river and noticing the rhythm of the water and my breath—it all counts. There is no hierarchy. This is the embodied, try-softer life.

And when we are present to our bodies, we can listen to the needs they may be speaking to us. I have known many friends and clients who thought that if they could simply have enough faith or pray enough, their physical or mental issues would resolve. This is the spiritual equivalent of white-knuckling it. When we live an integrated life, we can sense whenever anyone—within our culture or the church—begins to value the spiritual over the physical.

Without realizing it, many of us still follow a sort of functional Gnosticism: We say God loves us, but we've internalized the belief that we have to punish our bodies because they don't reach a certain standard. We ignore, shame, or disregard our humanity. As a result, when we speak of God's love, we don't mean that He loves all parts of us; we mean that He loves our spirits. Or we pray as though we value our flesh and bones, but we don't think the pain we experience *in* our bodies affects our whole person.

We have internalized an implicit narrative that says the spiritual world is good and the physical world is bad.<sup>2</sup> This is significant on many levels, but through the lens of trauma-informed faith, we can see that the consequences are dire. After all, for us as human beings, every issue we face affects the stories we hold in our bodies in some way.

We are not simply bodies walking around; we *are* our bodies. They are not all of who we are, but they are an essential part. We always pay a price when we try to live disembodied lives. The grief, anxiety, fear, or heartache we won't let ourselves feel will come out in other ways. As we discussed in chapter 2, each of our bodies is a system that longs for and is created to move toward healing. When we don't allow our bodies to process their experiences, they will certainly tell us—even if it means through panic attacks, chronic illness, depression, or more. Perhaps this is why the wildly popular and aptly named book *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Bessel van der Kolk, continues to resonate with so many folks. We know we can try to run from the wisdom and experiences of our bodies; after all, disconnection is one way we make it through uncomfortable relationships and experiences. But the truth is, our memories and experiences do not simply go away. Our bodies are their keepers, for better or worse.

## **LET'S PRAY AND GO TO THERAPY TOO**

When I was a child, my parents began hosting prayer groups in our home during some of our most tumultuous times. The main purpose

was to pray against and cast out any spirits that might be influencing the constant fighting between my parents or keeping any of us from experiencing God's peace. The chairs in our living room were arranged in a circle so we would be ready for the Holy Spirit to move in our group that night. I felt a weightiness during those meetings—perhaps it was physical, or maybe it was spiritual. All I know is that I craved the nearness of people who might understand my family's pain, and I hung on to the tiny prick of hope that our dysfunction would be healed.

In many ways those nights of prayer were beautiful. Sometimes I thought, *Finally, we've believed with our whole hearts, and God is ready to heal us.* But the healing never came as I thought it would, and no one suggested there was any other way to restoration and peace.

Now, with the benefit of time, I can't help but consider that God might have worked to address our household's dysfunction through more concrete means, such as therapy or medication. While I was never told those things were wrong, there was always an undercurrent that if our belief was strong enough, God would simply heal us in an instant. What I've come to see is that just as God can heal cancer through modern medicine, He can use tools like counseling to rewire our brains. I know now that we were looking for an exclusively spiritual answer to a largely psychological and physiological problem.

Research now shows that trauma and emotional dysregulation literally change the way our bodies function.<sup>3</sup> As a child, I assumed that my chronic pain, severe anxiety, and sense of deep aloneness were signs that God was angry with me or even punishing me. I see now that I was simply trying to hyperfunction as a member of a highly dysfunctional family. I was, in fact, a traumatized kid who needed not a longer checklist to follow but loving expressions of safety and care. I needed someone to try softer with me.

I believe Jesus intentionally interacted with flesh-and-blood bodies while on earth to show us a different way to live. I think of the man, blind from birth, whom Jesus and His disciples encountered in John 9. Seeing the man's need, Jesus spit on the ground and made a mud paste that he spread across the man's eyes. Then He told the man, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." The man did and then "came back seeing" (verse 7).

Did you notice that this man had to participate *with* Jesus in a physical way to be healed? This makes me think of how we participate *with* God as we pay compassionate attention to ourselves. What if when Jesus told the blind man to rinse off the paste, the man had turned to Jesus and said, "Thanks, but I think I'll wait till God heals me—you know, *the real way*." Oh my. I'm glad the blind man didn't do that.

Have you ever cut yourself off from a resource God wanted to use in your life? Have you ever completely discounted your physical experiences? I know I have, especially when I was younger. I thought, *Well, if I do such and such or if I listen to my intuition, will it mean that I don't believe God is big enough to heal me?*

Hogwash.

Listen: Jesus was certainly capable of healing the blind man on the spot. But He didn't. He took him through a *process*—a strikingly physical one.

## Ways Your Body Could Be Speaking to You

- Changes in temperature
- Sensations like tingling or heat
- Urges to move or flee
- Increase in heart rate
- Unexplained anxiety
- Unexplained heaviness
- Sudden alertness
- Feeling trapped or stuck

## WE ARE INVITED TO VALUE OUR BODIES TOO

How about you? Have you internalized the subconscious narrative that your body is worthless or bad? If so, you will be prone to objectifying, ignoring, numbing, or punishing yourself because, frankly, you won't think it matters.

Let's not fall for these lies. Our bodies matter. Our bodies are telling stories about our joy and our pain. And we are created to listen to their narratives. When we cut ourselves off from our bodies' sensations and act as if they didn't matter, the implications for our mental health are dire.

In the end, is it good simply to agree that our bodies matter? Well, yes and no. As with everything else we've learned about trying softer, we need more than just knowledge—we need an embodied experience of the truth.

To understand just how integrated our bodies are—in order to value our bodies the way that God does—we need to recognize that our brains are not just in our heads.<sup>4</sup> Quite literally, our brains are interwoven throughout our bodies. But how can this be? Researchers have discovered evidence for what many have known for a long time: The body is not just what transports the brain around; it is a highly interconnected system. And though important, the cortex is not the only part of the body that offers wisdom and insight.

Dr. Daniel Siegel discusses the complexity of the brain/mind/body in his book *Mindsight*. He writes, “By looking at the brain as an embodied system beyond its skull case, we can actually make sense of the intimate dance of the brain, the mind, and our relationships with one another.”<sup>5</sup> As it turns out, our brains go beyond our skulls and into even our fingertips. Siegel also points out that from our earliest growth in the womb various clusters of neural cells begin creating what will become our spinal cords and brains. But some of those same neural cells become part of all the tissue in our bodies (like muscles, the heart, and skin).<sup>6</sup>



In other words, the same neural cells that make up the brain also help form the rest of our bodies.

When we are aware of and attend to our bodies' sensations, we are practicing embodiment. According to Arielle Schwartz and Barb Maiberger, we rely on three sensory feedback systems within our bodies:<sup>7</sup>

*Exteroception* describes awareness of and interaction with sensory experiences outside our bodies. This includes sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Grounding and beauty hunting, two practices introduced earlier in the book, are examples of exteroception. When I go on a walk and smell the scent of freshly cut grass and notice the wind blowing across my cheek, my body is using exteroception to take in this information. These interactions with our bodies and the world around us help us feel supported, connected with others, and emotionally regulated, and they help us experience God in our world.

*Proprioception* refers to an awareness of the orientation of our bodies without having to consciously think about it. This especially takes into account how our bodies are positioned—whether lying, leaning, standing, or balanced. It is recognizing how our bodies take up space in the physical world. When I play games with my kids by hopping on one leg or throwing a ball, I am using proprioception to know what to do without having to consult my thinking brain on what my body should do.

*Interoception* relates to awareness of our internal states. Neurons throughout our bodies provide information to our brains about sensations such as hunger, thirst, pain, tension, body temperature, alertness, and thirst. As we go through the day and notice a heaviness in our chests, that our stomachs are growling, or even a sensation that we want to dance, we are experiencing interoception. Though we didn't use the term, we first discussed interoception, which is a key part of trying softer, in the previous chapter.

Essentially what all this means is that our age-old understanding of mind over matter is flawed. There is no distinction between mind *and* matter; there is only us. You may forget the technical terms for these ways of knowing, and that's okay. What is important is that you remember to honor and pay compassionate attention to your body.



When I was about nine, I learned I could beat most of the boys in basketball on the school playground. I started to crave more time on the court, so one of my favorite things to do was play pickup basketball at Peter Pan Park with my older brother and sister, who were both talented in their own right. Both of them were already in high school, so it was no small thing to join them. When we were ready to go, I'd tie up my pride and joy—my Charles Barkley Nike shoes—and grab my well-worn ball. Something about holding a ball in my hand and making a shot a girl wasn't supposed to be able to make taught me that I had what it took to show up in the world and to occupy space usually dominated by boys and men.

I'm grateful for this experience, and when I feel insecure or doubt myself, I often think back on those days as a reminder of how strong and capable I really am. During my college career, I wrote on my basketball shoes the Scripture verse my mom spoke over me when I was young: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9, NIV). The practice of remembering what it felt like to succeed strengthened me in those times when I was weary and scared. It's yet another example of what it means to pay compassionate attention to ourselves—to figure out what we need to be brave. This is particularly true for those of us who received implicit or explicit messages that it wasn't okay to take up literal space in the world.

As a counselor and a woman, I have seen how common it is, especially for females, to feel as if it isn't okay to honor our abilities, strength, and fire. My older sister and I discuss this topic often. During our phone calls, we take turns encouraging each other that it's okay to feel afraid when life seems difficult. But even so, somewhere in each of us is a strong, capable young woman who knows how to take up space on the basketball court and in the world. We take time to remind each other that we can trust that God created our bodies to be our allies and that they are giving us helpful information.

So how do we come to trust our bodies?

## **CULTIVATING A FELT SENSE**

A core concept within embodiment is developing and beginning to listen to our *felt sense*. We experience this sense when we compile all the sensations our bodies are giving us to viscerally *know* something and create a larger picture of what's going on inside our whole selves.<sup>8</sup> Our felt sense adds to our ability to live embodied lives because it gives us feedback about how to be more deeply present to our physical bodies and attend to whatever they are telling us.

Have you ever walked into a room filled with friends and felt yourself shift into a state of warmth and excitement simply because you

## **Ways to Speak to Your Body**

- Thank you for supporting me.
- You can take up as much space as you need.
- Thank you for the feedback you are giving me.
- I want to listen to what you have to tell me.
- You are worthy of good things.
- You can untangle the pain that is wound inside of you.
- I will keep you safe.

were there? Alternately, have you been with someone who had just received bad news, and without knowing what it was, you felt sad too? Both of these are examples of a felt sense. Listening to this information from our bodies helps inform what we do next. For example, in the first scenario above, I may find myself speaking with my hands and wearing a gleaming smile (both are expressions of embodiment that enable me to more fully experience the moment). In the second situation, if I notice heaviness and sadness inside me, I may attempt to connect with the hurting person by asking how they're doing, allowing my facial expression to mirror their sadness, or even asking if they'd like a hug. In a way, a felt sense helps inform how my body, brain, and spirit can remain aligned in these situations, and even how I can intuitively process difficulty. For our work of trying softer, a felt sense that is expressed through embodiment helps us to listen to, repair, and nurture the needs of our whole selves.

For all the reasons we've talked about—trauma, insecure attachment, shame, and more—many of us never developed the skills to listen to our felt sense. Or perhaps we have experienced this way of knowing something, but because we've learned to doubt and hate our bodies, we have ceased to listen to the information they give us.

Remember how in chapter 6 we talked about learning to love our neighbors *as* ourselves and how vital it is to be in touch with our own emotional experiences in order to connect with others? From a neurobiological perspective, we learn to be aware of our own internal physical selves through the insula.<sup>9</sup> It is considered the “superhighway”<sup>10</sup> that connects information from the body, lower brain, and mirror neurons to the middle prefrontal cortex. As with all of trying softer, the PFC is where we begin to make sense of what we're experiencing viscerally. This system is a vital part of our embodiment work.

Traditionally, intelligence has been thought of as a merely logical, linear way to understand the world. But our ability to remain open to the sensations and the felt sense of our bodies allows us to have a deeper

intuitive understanding of ourselves, others, our environment, and even what the Spirit may be communicating. Rather than predicting how we will feel in the future, this information from our bodies gives us insight into how we're experiencing the world in the here and now. From this awareness, we have more tools and information to support us as we move forward.

For example, a few years ago I knew I needed to make some changes around how I managed my private practice. Through twinges of dread that would begin in my stomach and rise to my throat, my body had been letting me know that my current situation wasn't working. I realized I needed to build in more breaks, establish stronger boundaries, and end my days earlier. Though I considered that some people might think I was making these shifts for my own convenience, I sensed internally that I had to rearrange these practical aspects of my day-to-day life to honor my whole self. As soon as I listened to my body and took those small steps to give myself more breathing room, the apprehension began to dissipate, and I felt a renewed sense of hope.

Learning to love my body rather than just asking it to perform has certainly been a journey. It hasn't happened by accident, frankly. Trying softer in this way has been one of the most foundational aspects of my journey because my body is the home that holds me.

And how can we grow and change if we can't feel at peace in our homes? Physiologically, how can we process and learn if we don't feel safe with ourselves? This is an invitation for all of us. We are each invited to come home to our bodies in order to experience life in the truest way possible.

## **TRY SOFTER**

When we live disembodied lives, we are not aware of the information our bodies are making available to us. One way we can begin to move toward embodied lives is by cultivating a listening posture around our

felt sense. When I work with clients on body-based exercises, it's useful to reflect on these questions with them: *How do you know what you know? What is informing your experience? How can you say something is a "gut feeling"?* The following exercises will help you practice answering these questions and deepen your own felt sense.<sup>11</sup>

1. Find two or three pictures in magazines and lay them out before you. Choose one to begin with, and notice your initial reaction to it. Is it pleasant or unpleasant? How do you know? Notice in your body what sensations are coming up for you. Take a moment to observe them. Do you feel tense or soft? Engaged or disconnected? Do you feel light, heavy, jumpy, achy, or bubbly? What color would you assign to the sensation? Are you curious or repulsed? Simply give yourself permission to observe why you know what you know and where you are experiencing sensations in your body. As you feel able, do this with one or two additional pictures in the magazines and continue noticing all the sensations that are coming up at one time (all of these put together are your felt sense about that particular magazine picture).
2. Now collect several pictures of family or friends and do the same exercise. What are your initial reactions? Where do you feel each sensation in your body? Do you feel tense or soft? What color would you assign to the sensation? Are you curious or repulsed? Simply give yourself permission to observe why you know what you know. As always, keep your window of tolerance in mind as you engage this practice, and if your reactions become overwhelming, you can always shift your attention to something more pleasant with beauty hunting (page 128) or with grounding (page 111).
3. If you are practicing the felt sense exercise with pictures of family or friends and encounter a difficult sensation in your body, see

if you can stay with the sensation for a few minutes. Consider placing a hand on the spot where you are feeling the sensation and—using the idea of tracking from chapter 6 (page 130)—observing if it changes.

While staying with the sensation, you may notice the urge to cry or change your breathing, and all of this is helpful as long as you remain in your WOT. The changes you experience as you stay with your felt sense are signs that your body is processing what you are experiencing. Note, however, that simply bringing awareness to what you are experiencing is already part of trying softer, because you can't listen to, repair, and nurture what you don't know exists.

The understanding you gain from these experiences is your felt sense, and over time, it can help you integrate insights you receive from your body in an intentional way. For now, the main purpose of this exercise is to bring into awareness *how* your body knows something. You will need this information as you learn to try softer with your emotions.

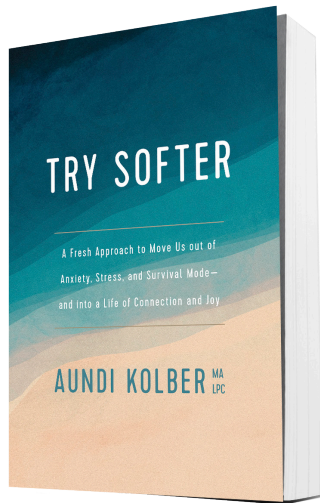
It's important to remember that the definition of embodiment is noticing and attending to the sensations of your body, knowing that God made your flesh and bones and called them good. We can do just about anything in an embodied way; the critical piece is to bring our *attention* to it.

## ENDNOTES

1. This idea is inspired by Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 1.
2. For more discussion on the intersection of body and spirit, see Tara M. Owens, *Embracing the Body: Finding God in Our Flesh and Bone* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015).
3. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 154–70.
4. Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 43.
5. Siegel, *Mindsight*, 44.
6. Siegel, *Mindsight*, 43.

7. Arielle Schwartz and Barb Maiburger, *EMDR Therapy and Somatic Psychology: Interventions to Enhance Embodiment in Trauma Treatment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 19.
8. This concept originated with Eugene Gendlin in his book *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981). I am basing much of my perspective on Peter A. Levine's expansion of it in his book (with Ann Frederick) *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1997), 67-73.
9. Another vital element of the brain that helps us map our own internal experiences and the experiences of others is the anterior cingulate cortex. For brevity, I have omitted discussion of this structure, but you can read more about it in Siegel, *Mindsight*.
10. Siegel, *Mindsight*, 61.
11. Levine, *Waking the Tiger*, 67-73.





In *Try Softer*, you'll learn how to

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# THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

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**HAVE YOU EVER HAD DAYS** when everything that could go wrong does go wrong? You lock your keys in the car while it's running, lose control with your kids, make a mistake at the office that results in hours of additional work. And just when you think not one more thing could possibly happen . . . well, fill in the blank.

#Thestruggleisreal, friends. Life often feels harder than we think it should be. It may not be major stuff, but it's enough to get us stressed—and then feeling guilty for not handling everything better.

Popular author, counselor, and Bible teacher Nicole Unice knows firsthand that our struggles actually reveal a lot about what's going on underneath. In this book, she focuses on the heart of the struggles, both little and big. In these moments, we tell ourselves stories—that we're doing it wrong, that we'll be stuck in this place forever, that God doesn't love us. But in *The Struggle Is Real*, Nicole teaches us how to course correct and find the truth of who we are and where we're going in Jesus.



**NICOLE UNICE** is an author, pastor, and teaching elder in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. For the past 20 years, Nicole has served the local church through teaching and leading various ministries and startup initiatives from capital campaigns to campuses. Her books come to life through her popular video curriculum series found on RightNow Media. She holds degrees from the College of William and Mary and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Nicole lives in Richmond, VA, with her husband and three children.

# The Reality

*Choose Your Hard*

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*Q: What's the hardest tea to drink?*

*A: Reality.*

A REALLY HONEST JOKE FROM CAMERON, AGE 13

I am obsessed with renovations, remodels, and makeovers. *I love them.* And I'm not alone—so are the millions of people who watch “transformation” reality shows every single week. From *Restaurant: Impossible* to *Fixer Upper*, we have a particular love for shows that feature redos of every kind. There are few things as satisfying as seeing a business or home that was ruined and left for dead come back to glorious life. What's even better—it happens neatly packaged into a fifty-minute show. Oh yes! I love speedy transformations that seem to turn out beautifully and end in a wow moment every time!

Can you imagine a *Fixer Upper* episode in which Chip and Joanna fail to create a beautiful renovation—or the lucky recipients fail to love it? You see, we all want a savior and we all love a savior. We may receive that saving vicariously through a broken-down restaurant or a ramshackle house that's restored to its glory. The problem is, that wow moment may quench our thirst for one hour, but then we are thirsty again.

I've felt that thirst myself, and I suspect it affects our entire generation. We don't believe the hype. Even when a part of us wants to believe in the restoration shows, another part of us is searching for clues on the Internet that perhaps one of those transformations didn't work out so we can feel a little better about what isn't changing in our own lives.

Transformation TV exists because our need for renewal and renovation is real. We all need to believe that our lives can become better, to hope that our future may be brighter despite how screwed up we feel from our past or in the present. That's a good and hopeful longing, but one that can't be met in a fifty-minute slice of our lives. For this reason, transformation TV has stolen our hope for change in two ways. One, we *stop* believing in transformation if it isn't as radical or obvious in our own stories as it is on our screens. Two, we *start* believing our lives must be too small for that kind of redemption. We forget that *our struggle is real* and that *our struggle is good*. But we don't need to stay there. Seeking more for our lives starts with one crucial question.

## **CHOOSING REAL REALITY**

It all comes down to this: *What and who will we believe?* With so much fake reality out there, we can become jaded, believing that there's no source of objective wisdom that is consistent, real, and relevant. So I've got a proposition for you: *Choose to believe the Bible is the ultimate source of reality for your life.*

Let's be honest about how this sounds for us. At first, the Bible may seem like an unlikely place to turn for a dose of reality. I've been teaching Bible studies and doing ministry for the past twenty years, but that doesn't mean that the Bible has always been my source for how to live my life. Here's the deal: Most people don't know that much about the Bible, whether they've been around church for a long time or not. Few people read it regularly, and even if they do, they don't quite know what to do with much of it. Much of Scripture is hard to understand on the

first read, and it doesn't package up like a good reality show does. I get that. I find it hard to read sometimes, too, and it takes a while to make the connection between what's happening in those pages and what's happening in my heart. Much of my time in the Bible has been about influence that's indirect and subtle, grown over time.

What's more, the Bible is definitely not reality show material. So many endings are left unwritten. So many relationships are left unmended. And so much time passes from prayers said to longings answered, from sacrifices made to blessings received, from wounds inflicted to healing completed. Yet in the midst of all of it is life—real life—the way we actually know it. Hidden within those unfinished stories is an invitation to the mystery of more, to a life lived not from fifty minutes of “whoa!” to “wow” but from moment to moment, one choice at a time. The Bible describes itself as a double-edged sword, piercing into the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12, NIV). Theologian Peter Kreeft says that we think we are reading the Bible, while all the while, it is reading us.<sup>1</sup> To enter into God's story means entering into a new “reading” of our lives, one defined not just by what we can see and experience but also by what God sees and experiences in us, what God is doing around us.

Remember Moses' last words to the Israelites: “Choose life”? That wasn't just a pithy phrase of inspiration thrown out because it sounded pretty. I think Moses' “choose life” comment was a last-ditch effort to lead God's people well, to remind them that they had choices to make every day that could add up to a life well lived. It wasn't a given that just because they were God's people, all would go well for them. There was a collective identity (We are God's), and there was individual responsibility (I have a part to play).

The whole story from the Old Testament was a shadow of what was to come in Jesus. When Christ came, He was the complete fulfillment of the smaller story of the nation of Israel.

But Jesus came for a much bigger story—not just for one nation

but for all nations. He came not just for one time but for our time as well—yes, for you and for me in this crazy, modern world we live in. What Jesus offered His followers is what our hearts still need now. He not only explained His Kingdom, but in His death and resurrection, He established that Kingdom right here, right now, in each of our hearts. The rest of the New Testament, from Acts through Revelation, demonstrates how life plays out with Jesus as King of the unseen but very real Kingdom of God into which we have all been invited—first on earth now, and then for eternity in heaven.

This matters because it changes *everything* about the way we interpret our stories. It means that “getting smart”—getting Jesus-smart, I mean—is a huge part of navigating our existence. To follow Jesus is a full-life conversion to a new “place.” Imagine if you uprooted and replanted yourself in a new country. You would still be you, but everything around you would be different. You would learn a new language, experience a new daily rhythm, and form new relationships. When we step into Christ’s Kingdom, we are transferring our hearts to a new place spiritually. Rather than uprooting and replanting our bodies, we are uprooting and replanting our spirits. If following Jesus isn’t actually affecting your everyday life like this kind of move, then something is tragically amiss. I mean it. If you feel like your experience with struggles, confusion, and hardship are no different from anyone else’s—whether they follow Jesus or not—something is really wrong. This is not the abundant life Jesus offered.

What I’m *not* proposing is that you need to adopt some kind of prayer or set of rules that will make your life better. A friend and leader in our church, Theresa, recently talked about her conversion to Christianity in her fifties. During the same week, both she and her husband encountered Christ and gave their lives to Him separately. When each finally told the other what had happened, they decided that they would now just become better versions of themselves. She laughed hysterically when telling me the story. “Imagine!” she said. “We

thought we would just be better versions of ourselves! Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Theresa recognizes their naiveté in believing they could be exactly the same people with a side of Jesus, rather than entirely transformed people who now live through Jesus.

If you are a transformation TV junkie like me, you need to remember that getting Jesus-smart is not going to be like a fifty-minute show that neatly ends in a “wow.” The struggle is real, and it’s not going away. However, it *does* mean that what is happening in you, through you, and around you—all of that is up for transformation, for change. It *does* mean that getting Jesus-smart is going to change how you do life. Theresa thinks, feels, and acts differently because of Jesus. The level of conversion—from anxiety to peace, from anger to joy, from bitterness to forgiveness—has changed her completely. But it didn’t happen all at once, and it didn’t necessarily come easily. But when she talks about Jesus, everything she says tells you, “This is worth it.”

## **BUT—IT WILL BE HARD**

A few years ago I grabbed a quick lunch with my friend Pete. Pete is part of the family that Dave and I stitched together as adults—the older and wiser people in our everyday lives who became our surrogate parents when we were young adults in a new city with a new marriage and new jobs and new everything. Pete is one of those guys who stuck with us even when we thought we should know everything about life, when we were little kids in grown-up bodies.

Because Pete and I serve on the same church ministry staff, we’ve done much of life together. Pete and I have gotten frustrated with each other, we’ve cried about things, we’ve apologized. Pete was there to visit when Dave and I had each of our children. I went to see him in the hospital when he had his knee replaced. Once you’ve seen each other in a hospital bed, you are basically family. And those people who loved



you in your inflated, self-important early adulthood years—who loved you then and still love you now—well, they are priceless.

During that lunch over bad fast-food salads, Pete and I caught up about the happenings in our lives. Me—in the square middle of it, middle childhood with the kids, middle management in my work, middle of figuring out what ministry was supposed to look like, how to live with purpose and passion and do this “life” thing. He—rounding the finish line in almost all of those ways, and also figuring out what ministry was supposed to look like in the unknown beyond of the empty nest. And then right in the middle of it all, right in the middle of the ordinary stuff of everyday conflict and frustration and the worries and the unknown, Pete put down his fork. I don’t remember what we were talking about before this moment, but I’ll never forget what happened next.

Pete stopped chatting and looked at me intently, and then he teared up. My chicken stuck in my throat a little as he paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and said, “You will suffer.” He looked at me again, and I felt as if he were looking past me into a deeper place, and I was getting uncomfortable. He nodded his head slowly and said, “There is suffering coming in this. You will not grow without it.”

I shrugged my shoulders and laughed it off. Then I changed the topic because whatever he was seeing right then—whatever Jesus-smart thing he could see that I couldn’t—I didn’t want to know about it, I didn’t want it to be true. I felt as if my life was too good to even use the word *suffer*. I felt like I wasn’t old enough for that; not to mention that I still thought I could escape from that word and that world, that somehow I could struggle but not suffer.

I was wrong.

If you are like me, most of your life involves struggle. We struggle to keep up with our schedules and to fit in our workouts and to eat enough fiber. We struggle to hold our tongues when we want to snap, and we struggle to find the blessing when we want to complain. The

struggle is, in fact, real. But sometimes—and for all of us, this time will come—well, sometimes we suffer.

The word *suffering* has this torturous quality to it. We often think it should be reserved for the worst of circumstances—for painful, incurable diseases; for tragic and evil death; for famine and war. *Surely* we wouldn't refer to the everyday struggles in our stories that way. But I think we lose when we don't acknowledge the simple reality that we suffer. Sometimes what was an annoying struggle becomes a painful, long season of disappointment. Perhaps the easiest way to define suffering is a struggle of any kind that isn't resolved and doesn't go away—at least not in your way or on your timetable. Your suffering will probably not look like famine or war. Maybe it'll look more like an aching loneliness or an unspoken longing. Maybe it will look like a thorny relationship that keeps getting sharper. Your suffering might look like a season of gray, a deep fog that settles over your soul. It might look like a long season of disappointment—where the present is boring and the future is bleak. It might look like the stony face of your teenager, that same face you once cupped in your hands but whose generous, loving spirit seems to have vacated his body. Using the word *suffering* for our lives isn't giving ourselves an excuse, or at least it doesn't have to be. *Instead, naming our reality for what it is, whether struggle or suffering, is the beginning of seeing the whole of our spiritual story.*

In 2 Corinthians, comfort and suffering are closely linked. God—the “God of all comfort” (1:3, NIV)—will comfort us in our troubles, and then we are called to comfort others in their troubles. All of that makes sense and feels right, but the passage goes on to say that “we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ” (1:5, NIV).

If I could talk to Paul in person, I would stop him and say, “Wait a second, buddy. Hold it right there. You seem to indicate that suffering is a *given*.” Since I feel like Paul might be a guy who likes to shoot straight, I imagine he might say something like, “Um, yes, what life have you been living? Of course it's a given!” This is Paul, who goes on

in this letter to talk about all of the hardships he's suffered, of despairing even of his life.

We can ignore the struggle or avoid it. We can downplay it or hide it. We can blame someone else for it. But we will never grow through it if we do not own it as our story in its fullest, rawest, realest form. The struggle is hard and painful. Suffering is even worse. But what the Bible says about the suffering is very different from what transformation TV portrays. God says that although the struggle may be hard, that doesn't mean it's bad. Suffering can be hard *and* good. Struggles can be painful *and* fruitful. Life is lived in the gray space between the two.

Paul loves to clarify the role of suffering in our faith. He frequently makes the connection between struggle and growth. Romans 5 calls us to not only survive our struggles, but to celebrate them: "We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment" (Romans 5:3-5, NLT).

What's amazing about this promise is that it tells us struggles are going to do the exact opposite of what we expect. Our struggles always seem to lead to disappointment—but in Christ, those same struggles cultivate endurance, strength, and hope.

I sometimes wonder if we can experience deep transformation without struggle. To be honest, I wish we could, but my experience with people shows me that the deeper the struggle, the deeper the person. When we deal with the painful realities in our lives, something happens in us that doesn't seem possible without the pain. I don't like that it's true, but that doesn't make it less true. In the mystery of God's wisdom, He uses struggles and sometimes suffering to clarify exactly who we are and who He created us to be. Through our suffering, He also demonstrates that He is exactly who He claims to be throughout Scripture: "our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1, NIV).

Struggles are not fun. They are not glamorous. They are not easy.

But that doesn't make them *not* good. From cover to cover, the Bible is open about our raw reality in the struggle. It's about the beautiful results created from the struggle. It's about the intangible and eternal things learned in the struggle, and it's about the people we can become through the struggle. The story line that we've bought about life—the one that says if it's not easy, it's not good—is a lie. Over time, it's a hard lie to keep up. It leaves us always feeling disappointed or resentful. We secretly believe our particular circumstances are harder than we deserve, but outwardly, we pretend we are too spiritual to get worked up about them. Our struggles are somehow too big for us and too small for God.

But our struggles are the training ground for wisdom. What matters most are not the circumstances we face, but what we will do with them, what we will learn from them, what we will do after we get into and out of one ditch and hike toward the next. Difficult circumstances always demand attention. The question is, what kind of attention will we give them? One option is to expend a ton of energy to hide, cover, and react to them. The other—and I promise, better choice—is simply to face them head-on with a whole different perspective.

One of my young friends just came out of a bad relationship. (Can I get an amen from all the readers out there who are trying to love their “bad relationship” friend?) The amount of emotional energy she expended on this guy could have powered all the sadness of a small country. Every conversation between them was loaded; every text was a secret message that must mean something different. Despite the fact that the guy mostly seemed like a jerk, my friend continued to try to translate the meaning of every encounter to keep the relationship alive. At one point, I gently pointed out that sometimes relationship resuscitation doesn't work and that perhaps it was time to back away from the body. But she wasn't ready for that.

Looking back, I think the relationship was really hard for her, but facing reality was just a little bit harder. It took a few months and a lot of hard knocks to her heart, but she was eventually able to choose honesty.

She was able to see that actions speak louder than words, and that it was time to let the boyfriend go. The choices on the table were to choose hard or choose harder. Choosing easy wasn't even an alternative.

Now let's consider our own lives. I think we want to believe that "choosing easy" is always on the menu. We hope that "easy" must be the next course, and we will just kind of push the food around in whatever course we are living and wait for the delicious next round. But that's not reality. To choose wisdom is the harder choice—because it starts with facing reality. It takes honesty with ourselves and with others. When we choose honesty, we see things in ourselves that we really don't like. When we choose honesty, we realize the places we struggle and the places where we may have to suffer. But the choice we must make is how we will *see* the hard. Strangely and sometimes unbelievably, it's actually in our trials that we experience real joy and freedom. In a crazy twist of reality, facing all that is hard and messy leads to freedom.

The book of James opens with these words, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2, NIV). James goes on to connect the trials we face with the perseverance of our faith. And what makes our faith grow? The wisdom God provides in the midst of those struggles. So rather than avoiding them, downplaying them, or outsourcing them to other people, what if we decided that choosing hard in the midst of our struggles is choosing reality?

The struggle can never be real if we don't get real about the struggle. But struggles are a "pay now or pay later" type of situation. We can pay now—we can do the hard work in the moment, as it's happening. Or we can pay later. We can let all the suffering and hurt start to pile up, weighing down our souls. We can hang on and hope for the best and keep trying harder. But eventually, the weight will crack us, and it will break us. But praise be to God who offers us healing repeatedly, persistently, and thoroughly.

## HOME BASE

When Pete interrupted my mediocre lunch and life with the jarring pronouncement that I would suffer, he was right. In the year that followed, I suffered. It wasn't public. I didn't experience sudden and tragic death. My husband didn't lose his job; our marriage didn't fall apart. None of my kids were given a diagnosis or suffered a trauma. Everything I would consider "big" enough for suffering—none of that happened. But turbulence came. I had a recurring nightmare that made me wake up sweating. I saw relationships that were cracking begin to completely fracture. I experienced a deep, thick layer of disappointment around a dream. I felt betrayed and abandoned by those who had loved me before. All of it happened quietly and privately.

Because no one circumstance felt like a life-changing, horrible event, I tried to rationalize each one away and soldier on by ignoring how I really felt about what was going on around me. Despite my love of honesty, I had a hard time being truthful with myself. I didn't want to use the *suffering* word for my pretty-good life. I didn't think I could own a word so big, so spiritual, a word that seemed to be much more dramatic than the issues I was facing.

But I've come to look back on that season and see that what was happening quietly was death—deaths of all kinds. Along with some of my dreams and relationships dying, some of my idealism was killed off, along with a healthy dose of unrealistic expectations. The part of me that loves transformation TV began to see these shows for what they are—a brief respite from reality, not reality itself. All the thin veneers of "fine" living that I had painted over the pain began to peel off, slowly, and with the peeling back, layers of my own heart seemed to peel away too. I discovered I was much less in control and much weaker than I wanted to believe. I found myself more anxious about everything—getting older, parenting, feeling valuable at work, and handling conflict

in my relationships. I was navigating the inevitable losses of life with a lot less panache than I expected from myself.

The struggles, at least day by day, feel controllable. The suffering feels bigger and scarier. I didn't want the suffering, and in that, I was avoiding the two big truths we've discovered so far: Following God is worth it, and seeing the Bible as our ultimate reality makes our path much clearer. I finally ran out of my own strength, my own ideas, and my own ability to live in this uncomfortable and personal darkness. And when I would wake up in the middle of the night again, when I would lie in bed with my eyes wide open, willing myself to see physically but knowing that only spiritual eyes would give me vision, I began to say "help." I prayed "help me" again, my fuller, more wordy prayers giving way to a simple and desperate and honest ask, over and over again. I prayed "help" like I really needed it. This was not a *Can you give me a hand with the groceries?* kind of help. This was the *rescue me* kind of help, the desperate help. It was the most honest thing that came out of me through that whole season. And then one night, while praying with my whole heart, feeling my heart crying *help*, I felt a phrase impressed on my heart, like a note still warm from folding being slipped into my hand. The phrase was simple: *Return to home base.*

I'm no baseball player. I have a hard time even watching the game (I'm always there for the socializing). But I knew what home base meant. Home base was safe. Home base was what we called the place of security when we played an elaborate game of tag growing up. To get back to home base was to be in the safe zone. And although it was a small area, within that space I always felt totally free. I turned the phrase over in my mind, considering the ultimate home base, the promise I knew to be true:

*God is greatest, and He knows best.*

As those days pressed on me, when I felt like I couldn't summon the strength to handle all the needs around me, I reminded myself that *God is greatest*. His ways are highest. He is never surprised. He could navigate

my inner world far better than I ever could. “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.” Those words from Psalm 139:23 (NIV) became a well-worn prayer, but I began to pray that verse more honestly and added the next verse as well: “. . . lead me in the way everlasting.” Now I wanted God to not just search me, not just know me, but also guide me. Lead me into the way for the singular day ahead, the singular choice ahead.

*God is greatest, and He knows best.*

In the midst of that suffering season, that only-choice-is-surrender season, I learned that we don’t gain God’s wisdom in the “wow” moments. The kind of wisdom gained in hardship comes from ruthless honesty before God—a deeper searching. It’s about a desperate desire to be known and to be given just enough faith to be led. This deeper searching often means tracing our stories back to discover pockets of hurt or unforgiveness or deception that require Jesus’ healing and truth. Sometimes the struggle means we have to double back down a path we thought we had already covered, to retrace some old steps, to find important treasure that we left behind in that last scuffle.

That suffering season taught me that we all need a home base to return to, and from that home base, we make small, faithful choices. Then we “choose life” in the way we honor our bodies, our minds, and our hearts through the daily care and keeping of our souls. During another hard season recently, it seemed like the smallest daily choices were the ones that broke me free. First, I decided to be completely honest before God, using uncensored, unfiltered, and often irrational words when talking with Him. When I prayed, “I don’t want this” and “This isn’t fair” and “Where are You?” I realized I was allowing my soul space to vent before resting in the truth that *God is greatest, and He knows best*. And although this may sound a little weird, my second small choice was to eat an apple every day. Eating an apple became a tangible reminder that I needed to take care of myself, that it was worth taking the time



to cut an apple *just for me*, and that this one tiny choice was one healthy step in the right direction.

You see, the most real place of struggle is not on the outside, where others can see it. The struggle is most real on the inside, in the inner places. We bring those inner places before God with the most uncut and specific reality, and then we make those small outer choices that honor our souls. Ann Voskamp says in her book *The Broken Way*: “Busy is a choice. Stress is a choice. Giving yourself to joy is a choice. Choose well.”<sup>2</sup>

A few months ago, I spoke with my prophetic friend Pete again. I put my hand on his arm and told him I remembered that day when he promised me suffering. And this time I was the one who teared up when I said, “You were right.” And I did two things at once: I clenched my jaw together and I smiled. Both were genuine. Choosing the hard is like that. It’s a clench-your-jaw and get set for reality with a break-free smile of freedom and joy.

When we find our way to reality, when we kick through our own defenses and get to the raw honesty, we make an incredible discovery. Jesus is already there, catching us at the bottom, welcoming us to the way of freedom, leading us forward, one small, wise choice at a time. Choosing our hard reality often means going back before we can go forward. Choosing reality is asking the simple question, *God, what do I need to know?* It’s praying the simple prayer: *God, what do You want to heal?* When we face reality square on, we let God begin the process of rewriting the story.

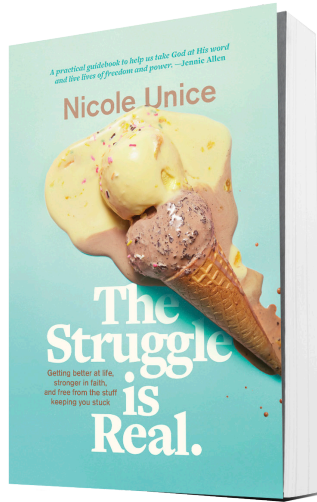
## **KEEPING IT REAL**

1. Have you experienced good struggle? If yes, what did you learn from it?
2. Think about your own story. Has it been easier for you to acknowledge struggles as important or to acknowledge suffering as real?

3. What's one small, wise choice you can make to care for your body, your mind, or your heart this week? (Think really small. Don't forget the apple story. Change takes time and requires small victories.)

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. Peter Kreeft, *You Can Understand the Bible: A Practical and Illuminating Guide to Each Book in the Bible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), xvi.
2. Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 128.



In *The Struggle Is Real*, Nicole Unice will help you learn to write a new story for yourself through life's difficult moments—trusting that in the midst of every struggle, God offers you a path to grow stronger, smarter, and more like Jesus through it all.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/the-struggle-is-real-participants-guide/9781496427526>

# THE WELLNESS REVELATION

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**WOULDN'T IT BE AMAZING** if you could embark on a single program that would help you get both physically and spiritually fit, while freeing you to pursue God's dreams and goals for your life?

Maybe you have always struggled with your weight, riding a constant roller coaster of numbers that go up and down. Or maybe you find yourself increasingly stressed out by the world and all its demands.

In *The Wellness Revelation*, certified fitness professional Alisa Keeton will challenge you to get fit with God so that He can free you to find your purpose. She teaches that when you become fit physically and spiritually, you will be better equipped to love and serve others. *The Wellness Revelation* will change the way you perceive yourself and the way you live.



**ALISA KEETON** is a wholehearted pursuer of God’s love. After more than twenty-five years as a fitness professional, Alisa felt God leading her to bring fresh meaning to the world of health and fitness. At first she resisted, but eventually she got on her knees, rolled up her sleeves, and followed His call. In 2011, she launched Revelation Wellness. This nonprofit ministry uses fitness as a tool to spread the gospel message, inviting participants to become whole and live well. The Revelation Wellness instructor training program equips and sends out “fitness missionaries” throughout the United States and around the world, while RevWell TV brings faith-based online workouts and resources to anyone with Internet access.

Alisa lives in Phoenix with her husband, Simon, and their two children, Jack and Sophia. As a family, they are on mission to change the world with the kind and courageous love of God.

## WEEK 3

# Live Out His Purpose for You

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*“Everything is permissible for me”—  
but not everything is beneficial.*

*“Everything is permissible for me”—  
but I will not be mastered by anything.*

1 CORINTHIANS 6:12, CSB

When I was fourteen, my new friend Julie invited me to an aerobics class. This was three years after Jane Fonda released her first workout video, so everyone was aware of the leotard/banana hair clips/scrunchie sock look from TV. To a certified tomboy like me, though, aerobics seemed exotic, and the thought of moving my body in an organized fashion was intriguing and intimidating.

*But why not?* I thought. *I’ll give it a go.* I didn’t have the official workout duds (no spandex leotard or shiny flesh-colored tights), so I figured a cotton T-shirt, my gym shorts, and some K-Swiss sneakers would have to do.

As soon as Julie and I walked into the newly opened aerobics studio in the strip mall, I was blinded by the spandex. The colors. The high-stacked, hair-sprayed, permed hair held back by terry cloth headbands. The instructor, Jackie, a tall, beautiful African American woman with

strong legs, toned arms, and a bright smile, quickly put me at ease. She clapped her hands and shouted, “Okay, ladies! It’s time! Let’s get moving!” My heart began to race in excitement and fear of the unknown.

Jackie walked over to the corner, pulled out a vinyl disc, placed it in the record player, and then dropped the needle on the record. *Boom!* Like a freight train, we were off—doing jumping jacks, aerojacks, grapevines, and rocking horses. I was picking up a new language, set to the *Blues Brothers* sound track, rather quickly.

I loved every single moment.

For that one hour, all the fears and insecurities I had as a typical teenager seemed to be swallowed up in a chasm of joy. I felt free. I felt like I could do anything. I had a sense that joy was my birthright.

At the very end of the class we lay on the floor on our backs, like scattered corpses. Instead of feeling dead, I had never felt more alive. As we lay there, Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car” playing in the background, Jackie walked between us, speaking softly.

“Well done, ladies. Remember to breathe now. That’s it—just a gentle stretch.”

As Jackie’s kind words reached me, a thought crossed my mind. It was unlike any other I had ever had. *Whatever that woman just did, I am going to learn how to do that.* I now know with certainty that this inspired idea did not come from me. It was the beginning of discovering my life purpose—to lead others into a life of joy and freedom. Though it would be years before I led my first workout session, I had found my work assignment.

We commonly use the word *vocation* to describe our life’s work. The root word, *vox*, means “voice.” Without realizing it as I lay on the floor of that aerobics studio, I had also found my voice.

God created you for this world, here and now, to speak into the world in a way that only you can. Your voice—your work—is as unique as your thumbprint.

Even if you find yourself burned out, worn down, unexcited, or

drained from your current life's work, I have great news: God can bring new life into old work—*your* work of everyday living—and free you from the “blahs” of the daily grind.

Our lives are about glorifying God and giving Him a good name. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV), “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” That is our work!

We have the opportunity, as we simply go about our everyday lives, to do work as a witness. We provide evidence that Jesus is who He says He is: our Redeemer, Savior, Helper, and Encourager. This sums up God's work, which He does every day without ceasing. He saves, helps, encourages, and loves like no one else ever could.

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**REMEMBER to use your Moving Forward Journal this week to track your food and water intake, as well as to remain focused on this week's Scripture verse.**

**You can download a copy at**

**[www.revelationwellness.org/book/workout](http://www.revelationwellness.org/book/workout).**

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When people look at you, do they see this power of Christ in you? We display God's glory to others. With our lives, we proclaim that He is our Strength and that He picks us up out of the pit to release us from bondage. Then we exhibit His strength through the choices we make, the actions we take, and the voices we use. What we do with our bodies, whether it be a hug or a handshake, a push-up or a push away from the table, shows Christ's love and power inside of us to a world that needs to see this great mystery.

When writing his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul said a lot about how the believers there used their bodies. After all, the temple of Aphrodite (goddess of love), with more than one thousand temple prostitutes, dominated the city of Corinth. Paul reminded the believers there that their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit. Our bodies do not belong to us, and we are to honor Christ in the way we use



them (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We can't authentically bear witness to Christ if we treat our bodies in contradiction to His ways.

Brennan Manning, a great author, former priest, and speaker who for many years struggled with alcoholism, is credited with pointing out that “the greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips then walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”<sup>5</sup>

We have a calling to be authentic in our life's work—to live out our vocation so that God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit receive glory, honor, and fame. That includes how we care for our bodies. As I stated in week 1, 70 percent of Americans are overweight, with nearly 38 percent of those people facing morbid obesity.<sup>6</sup> And those percentages are going up. The number of people affected by this epidemic is rising, with the diagnoses of heart disease, insulin-dependent diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure also increasing.

As the church, we have an obligation and a great opportunity to *be* the change. “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7, NIV). We are called to live for a higher purpose, which calls us to higher accountability and self-discipline. If others see us living in poor health and disease while filling ourselves with things that don't help but hurt our health, what are we really saying about our God of power and love?

What do you think when you read the word *self-discipline* above? I am not surprised if it leaves you feeling burdened. After all, you didn't choose many of the sharp pieces of your life's puzzle. Maybe you've faced divorce, depression, betrayal, or loss, and you've turned to food or other addictive substances instead of turning to God. You may have taken the puzzle pieces of life and tried squeezing them into the wrong places to make them fit.

When it comes to our goals for changing ourselves, we often try harder at working our plan. In fact, this approach is rampant in the

weight-loss world. I want you to exhale because we are about to flip that idea of self-discipline on its back and pin it to the mat. I want to give all of us a new way to look at self-discipline, also known as self-control, which is one of the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23).

This doesn't mean living perfectly. That is far beyond us. It does mean living in the truth that God is love (1 John 4:16). That realization leads to wholeness: living as who we are—dearly loved, valued, and cherished children of God who happen to live in a fallen world. We look to Jesus, whose purpose in coming to earth was to exhibit the power, love, and grace of the Father. He faced the same struggles, trials, and temptations that we do but stayed pure in heart, mind, and body. He was blameless. He is the embodiment of the God-reality that a purpose-filled life is one that is *holy* and *whole*.

In response to His love, we desire to follow Him. Our obedience is a natural overflow of our love for God: “If you love me, keep my commands” (John 14:15, NIV). The more you know who God is and who you are in relationship with Him, the more you will grow to love Him. The more you love Him, the more naturally obedience will come. So the root of obedience—doing whatever God asks in order to live in agreement with His purposes—is love.

Obedience precedes self-discipline. Obedience trumps self-discipline. Obedience is the cause, and self-discipline is the effect. And according to Jesus, obedience is something that we will desire because it feeds our love affair with God. People who love God look the temptation of eating another cookie or obsessing over their bodies in the eye and say, “Get behind me. I have something so much better than you.”

## **LOVE AND ENERGY: THE ABILITY TO DO WORK**

Besides centering your being and doing in God, what is needed in order to complete work? Energy!

Food is the fuel that produces the physical energy we need to do our

work. Just as God has a plan and a purpose for us, He also has a plan when it comes to food, drink, and nourishment for our bodies and souls. Food gives us the energy to do *His* work—the work of loving and living well. Mercifully, God’s part is to do the work in and through us. Our job is to care for ourselves today by making choices for our health that will benefit us tomorrow.

The bottom line is this: What you put in is what you get out. My friend Heidi, who often travels overseas in her work with Food for the Hungry, put it like this: “I realize that as far as my health goes, each day I am making a choice on how I choose to serve God both now and in the future. I can make choices today that will lead me to be an eighty-year-old in a wheelchair, sharing the love of the Lord, or I can choose to live a health-filled life that will allow me to still be out in the mission field, doing what I love and living out how God created me—reaching the unreachable in the darkest places and teaching others about God’s heart for the poor.” If she doesn’t care for her physical well-being, she knows there will be a price to pay in her spiritual, mental, emotional, and social relationships.

Unfortunately, many of us have gotten used to being *underfed* in our quest for spiritual truth and *overfed* in our quest to satisfy physical hunger. We are slowly spiraling further and further into darkness, lies, and bondage. While God has given us everything for our enjoyment, we need to be wise in our choices—including what we eat and drink. When it comes to our physical bodies—bones, hearts, lungs, and brains—it is of utmost importance that we figure out what fuels us best to love.

## **FOOD: OUR FUEL**

In the Eucharist, we drink the juice or wine and eat the bread to remember Christ. Isn’t it interesting that God chose food and drink as a way of honoring Him? Why not a specific prayer? Why not a fast? Why not

make it a grueling activity like hiking up a mountain while carrying a large hundred-pound rock?

Of course, an act like this would have made a fitness-minded person like me very pleased. But no, I think God chose food and drink because they are the physically sustaining elements of life. If He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, then He is our spiritually sustaining element of life. The food we choose to eat is another way to honor the God who loved us first. Not in a prideful “Look what I do for God” kind of way, but in an “All I need is You, Lord” way, from a humble and grateful heart.

While many fad diets promote ever-changing direction on how to eat, the Wellness Revelation is not about restricting you by telling you specifically what or how much to eat. *The key is this:* I will ask you to stay constantly conscious of what food does for you and how it makes you feel. The types of food we eat definitely affect how we feel and, in turn, how we do our work. They give us either sustaining fuel (high octane) or draining fuel (low octane).

When we choose wisely, the food we consume will reflect our call to live into Christ’s highest purposes for us.

## **HIGH-OCTANE FUEL VERSUS LOW-OCTANE FUEL**

Let’s get down to some of the nuts and bolts of a healthy lifestyle—one guided by quality nourishment for our bodies and souls. All food, of course, is broken down into fuel for the body. This fuel is called *glucose* (a fancy word for *sugar*), and it is our bodies’ primary energy source and the most readily available form of energy. At the cellular level, glucose is used to keep all the bigger systems of our bodies running smoothly. Just as a car won’t run unless there is gasoline in the tank, our bodies can’t function without glucose.

This major source of energy is found mostly in a macronutrient called carbohydrates. As much as we accuse them of being the bad guys today, we need carbohydrates. When we don’t have them, we know it

pretty quickly. For instance, certain parts of our brains derive almost all of their energy from carbohydrates. If you have ever gone on a low-carbohydrate diet, you may have quickly noticed your loss of energy and focus, mentally as well as physically. You may have felt light-headed, dizzy, and lethargic and assumed it was from lack of food. It was actually more likely due to the lack of glucose.

When it comes to getting the glucose we need from our diets, there are poor, good, better, and best fuel choices. Most people think of bread, pasta, or bagels when they hear the word *carbohydrates*, but they are also found in the form of fruits and vegetables.

God was specific with Adam and Eve when He told them what foods they were to eat. “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food” (Genesis 1:29, NIV). Fruits and vegetables. These are the original foods the Creator designed to be our fuel, prior to the Fall. I think it is quite interesting to realize that before the serpent so cunningly deceived us, we were created to be vegetarians. No animal meat was given for our existence before we fell. But more important, there was no mention of cake, doughnuts, cookies, or the syrupy, sugary liquid we call *soda* either.

This week we are going to expose the poor fuel substitutes. Think of them as cheap, low-octane fuel sources. Sure, they have some “go” power to them, but since they lack purity and cleanliness, using them comes at the risk of our engines eventually blowing up from all the crud and muck they leave behind.

This type of fuel has been manhandled. These foods were created from once-upon-a-time God-given foods, only to be stripped of some if not all of their original nutrients. Most were then beefed up with processed chemicals, all to prolong their shelf life or to produce a bigger flavor explosion so you will keep buying them. Nature has a hard time competing with the party these processed foods create in your mouth!

A few big frauds are white table sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, and

enriched white flour. All are carbohydrates, and most of them are found in the boxes, bottles, and bags lining our grocery store shelves. These low-octane, cheap fuel substitutes that hide out in our foods are really just frauds. And if we are not wise, they can steal, kill, and destroy the good design of our bodies.

## **LOW-OCTANE FUEL**

### *Fraud #1: White Sugar*

White sugar is a form of carbohydrate. At one point, it fell from God's design. Sugar actually comes from the root of a beet or a cane, which are both plants. It is first stripped off the sugarcane or sugar beet to become brown sugar. It is then stripped down even more to become basic white table sugar (sucrose). Sucrose is highly addictive and, depending on how much of it you consume, can cause weight gain.

Sucrose is a form of empty calories since the sugar beet or sugarcane loses all its valuable plant nutrients during processing. Your body has no specific use for white sugar; it simply provides an immediate blood sugar surge. When you eat white sugar, your body's metabolic system lights up (which leads to the quick initial high). In order to control the blood sugar spikes, your insulin (a hormone that regulates blood sugar) spikes as well. Sucrose is very beneficial for controlling the plummeting blood sugar levels of someone having a diabetic attack—but too much sucrose can just as easily cause a diabetic attack. Here we see the concept of “permissible but not always beneficial” (see 1 Corinthians 6:12).

Raised insulin levels due to sucrose consumption can cause you to overeat. Shortly after eating sugar-laced foods, you may be just as hungry as you were before. You may also feel your energy plunging, which may lead you to go for the quick fix again. Why does this happen? When you eat white sugar, it raises your level of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that affects your mood. Serotonin is a happy hormone. You feel good upon its release. Yet within an hour of eating sugar, your mood is likely to come

crashing down along with your energy. To compensate, your body wants more sugar. You're now in a vicious cycle. An even bigger problem is this: The more sugar you eat, the more resistant your serotonin levels become to sugar, so you need more and more sugar to elevate your mood, causing you to fill up on unnecessary calories with no benefit to the body.

You need to be very aware of the rattling chains of addiction as you wander around in search of more sugar. Sugar is addictive and has the power to fog your thinking. A clear, alert, and conscious mind is crucial as you pursue better health and well-being through a biblical, holistic lifestyle.

### ***Fraud #2: High-Fructose Corn Syrup***

Through the 1950s, sucrose (white table sugar) was the number one form of sugar used in the processing and manufacturing of foods. But then food chemists figured out that sucrose can be broken down even further into fructose and glucose (remember glucose is what our bodies are designed to break food into). This led to the creation of the sweet golden liquid called high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS).

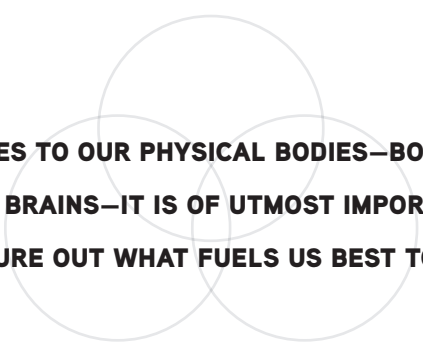
HFCS became highly desirable by food manufacturers since it is easier to distribute and has a longer shelf life than sucrose. It also tastes sweeter, meaning a little goes a long way, and it is easier to mix and blend. Almost all boxed foods, from cookies to crackers, contain HFCS.

High-fructose corn syrup is much like table sugar in that it hinders our bodies' ability to regulate weight by making our insulin and blood sugar levels continually oscillate. It is even more stripped down than white table sugar, meaning that it once again interferes with the body's ability to process its own food.

### ***Fraud #3: Enriched White Flour***

The definition of *enrich* is “to make rich . . . by the addition or increase of some desirable quality, attribute, or ingredient.”<sup>77</sup> Sounds good. Why

wouldn't we all want to be enriched? I would like to believe that the Wellness Revelation will enrich you, increasing your quality and quantity of life!



**WHEN IT COMES TO OUR PHYSICAL BODIES—BONES, HEARTS,  
LUNGS, AND BRAINS—IT IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE THAT  
WE FIGURE OUT WHAT FUELS US BEST TO LOVE.**

The enriching of foods actually came from good motives. Once upon a time, humans lived through countless famines. Whether the shortages were due to regional weather conditions, lack of resources, or financial destitution, people had to do all that they could to avoid malnourishment or death.

In order to better prepare households for times of famine, the processes of canning and preserving were developed. As a result, foods didn't spoil and were available year-round. Food-processing techniques continued to develop during the twentieth century, providing consumers with more and more prepared foods with longer shelf lives. The downside of food processing is the loss of nutritional value and the addition of preservatives to keep foods from spoiling. This is good for combating famines but bad for overall nutritional value. During the age of famines, the good outweighed the bad, and food processing was a blessing. But famines are unheard of in America today.

Like sugar, enriched flour is very common in processed food. When I was a kid, I loved a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a grilled cheese made with slices of white Rainbo bread. After school, you could find me in front of the TV watching *The Brady Bunch* while nibbling away on a piece of Rainbo bread, challenging my brother to see who could



eat their piece into an animal shape first. You might wonder how something that tastes so good could be so bad.

When manufacturers strip grain of its outside layers, they also remove most of the grain's nutrients. Yet this processed grain has a longer shelf life than whole grain (which means more money and less loss for the food industry), and foods made with this flour have a smoother and softer consistency.

By food industry standards, *enrich* means to put back some of what was taken away, including some of the vitamins that were lost during processing. Whenever you see the term *enriched* on a food label, know that the food is a lower-grade fuel. Some of the original nutrients have been placed back in it, but it has nowhere near the nutritional value it had in its whole state. Enriched flour will give you some energy, but because it's a lower-octane fuel, your gas tank will empty quickly.

#### *Fraud #4: Alcohol*

I debated whether or not to talk about alcohol because it is neither a nutrient nor a necessary part of a healthy diet. Yet since more and more people consume alcohol, I think it's worth discussing.

Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine, and perhaps you, like some others who love Him, enjoy a good glass of wine. However, remember that God's heart for all His kids is that they be free of anything that might take them captive (see Isaiah 61:1). As this week's Bible verse says, "Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything'" (1 Corinthians 6:12, CSB). If Paul had been talking about alcohol, I think he would have said: "Listen! You may have a glass of wine, but a glass of wine is never to have you."

If the thought of not being able to have your glass of wine at night makes you panic or break out in a cold sweat, then I would argue that God may be putting His finger on something that is destroying your

freedom. Alcohol has you. An idol is present, and God is ready to fight for you. All you need to do is move in step with His powerful Spirit. He loves you too much to not bring this to your attention.

Now let's consider the body's physical response to alcohol. Though alcohol is not a food group, it carries calories. A gram of alcohol has almost twice as many calories as a gram of protein or carbohydrates. It's calorie dense (high calorie count per gram) and calorie dumb (no calorie worth). And when it comes to weight loss, alcohol can be a roadblock. With the first sip, the body recognizes the properties of alcohol and puts it immediately to work as energy to be burned.

While alcohol is in the bloodstream, proteins, carbohydrates, and fats get pushed into the locker room, waiting their turn to run onto the field and be burned for energy. These unused metabolic superstars get sent off into the body to be stored as fat—to be called upon the next time there is a real need for a slow, steady burn. And since alcohol itself has no redeeming nutrients, it clogs up the metabolism until it is used by the body's system.

## **HIGH-OCTANE FUEL**

We need to center our lives more on energy-sustaining foods than on energy-depleting ones. These high-octane foods should be the foundation of our diet. They will not *deplete* us of energy but will *nourish* our bodies from the inside out, transforming the way we think, act, feel, and, yes, even look! Remember, there is power in our food. What besides food can get into the smallest cells in our bodies and change them? From the moment it hits our saliva, which begins breaking it down into various enzymes, food will change who we are for the better or for the worse.

Only God's Holy Spirit and Jesus, the Word, can go that deep, which is one reason He is referred to as "the Bread of Life." The Word has nourishing power and qualities. And so should our "daily bread."

## *Whole Grains*

I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the *whole* earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

GENESIS 1:29, NIV, EMPHASIS MINE

In contrast to the white bread made of enriched flour, whole grains are as close to their natural state as possible and have higher amounts of the vitamins and minerals that our bodies so desperately need. At one point, enriched flour was a whole grain that came from a seed-bearing plant (i.e., wheat). For the sake of big business, it was refined and processed, which robbed it of most of its beneficial qualities as a food source.

Most whole grains are a little nutty in flavor and texture. If you haven't been eating whole grains, they might take some getting used to. We are in the process of retraining our taste buds, so expect a little resistance at first. To this point, if your diet has been composed of low-octane fuel, you have actually been spoon-feeding your taste buds and digestive system. It has all been broken down for you. It is normal to have some challenges, physically, physiologically, and psychologically, when making a shift to the more mature food that God designed for your system.

Be sure to read the ingredient list when you are looking for whole-grain food. The food industry might put "whole" on an item's packaging, but the ingredient label may say "enriched whole wheat flour."

A great way to see if a whole-grain food is really nutritious is to see how many grams of fiber per serving it contains. A quality whole grain will provide you with at least three grams of fiber per serving. Fiber is a key reason why a whole grain is better than an enriched one.

Fiber is a secret weapon for good health and weight management. It functions as a binding agent with fatty acids to prolong the amount

of time it takes to empty your stomach. When you eat fiber-rich foods, insulin levels tend to rise at a much slower pace, since sugar is released and absorbed more slowly. You feel full sooner and stay that way longer.

Fiber is also used in cleaning out the body's waste. Without getting graphic, it is best to think of fiber as your body's own pipe-cleaning service. Fiber keeps us from being clogged with crud. As fiber is digested, it cleans out the walls of the large and small intestines, keeping your digestive tract in proper health. Fiber is always present in healthy foods, so it is no surprise that it is found in just about "every seed-bearing plant . . . and every tree that has fruit with seed in it" (Genesis 1:29, NIV).

### *Fruits and Vegetables*

Do you remember that fruits and vegetables are carbohydrates? We tend to think of carbohydrates only as those things that are starchy and bread-like. Yet God created fruits and vegetables to be our main source of fuel.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that the average person eat at least three cups of vegetables and two cups of fruit each day. A 2013 study concluded that only about 13 percent of adults in the United States were eating the recommended daily servings of vegetables and about 24 percent were eating the recommended amount of fruit each day.<sup>8</sup> These numbers are not surprising when you consider that 70 percent of Americans currently struggle with their weight.

If you haven't been eating enough fruits and vegetables, *now* is the time to begin. However, if your diet is currently low in dietary fiber, don't raise your fiber intake too quickly, as this may trigger flatulence, bloating, and other undesirable side effects. Your body is going to need time to adjust to mature food. Start by including one or two high-fiber foods daily. Then, every three or four days, add another high-fiber food.

Before you know it, your body will begin performing at a whole new level of energy and well-being! The quality of life you enjoy is determined by the quality of foods you eat.

### *Protein*

Getting adequate protein is a necessary element of healthy living. Proteins are the foundation of your structural and functional makeup. Structurally, proteins form most of the solid material in the human body. For example, keratin and collagen are the main building blocks of your muscles, tendons, hair, and skin. Functionally, proteins assist in the activities and processes of the human body. Take hemoglobin, a functional protein that is found in the red blood cells and helps to carry oxygen to all parts of the body. Myosin is a protein in muscle tissue that helps in the contraction of any given muscle. Insulin is a functional protein that helps regulate the storage of glucose—the breakdown of sugar—in the body. Enzymes are proteins that help the productivity of specific chemical reactions in the body. Without protein, we would literally begin to fall apart.

As I've said, I believe we were originally intended to live well and thrive solely on fruits and vegetables (see Genesis 1:29-30), but humans didn't trust God's plan and gave in to the temptation that led to sin. To cover the shame of the naked man and woman, the Lord killed an animal and created the first articles of clothing. I don't have proof, but based on the fact that with the Fall came pain, toil, suffering, and ultimately death (see Genesis 3:16-19), I wonder whether the physical body—biologically, chemically, hormonally, and internally—began to function imperfectly as well, to the point that the basic “building blocks” of muscle (amino acids) began to deconstruct. Is it possible that God killed that animal not only to clothe Adam and Eve but eventually to provide another avenue, beyond fruits and vegetables, for us to rebuild our bodies (see Genesis 9:3)? Maybe. While it *is* possible to

get all your protein from a diet of fruits and vegetables alone, it can be challenging to do so in an imperfect world. Therefore, perhaps animal meat is God's provision for those who choose to eat it.

Not all proteins are created equal. The leaner the better, and the cleaner the better. *Lean* means "with fewer naturally occurring fats." *Clean* means "devoid of hormones, additives, and preservatives."

Because consumers seemed to like more fat in their meat, the meat industry began using selective breeding, overfeeding, and the addition of hormones to make animals grow bigger and fatter. We are now beginning to see the negative effects of these actions. When children eat meat with added steroids and growth hormones, their overall growth is affected. Eating meat containing these additives has also led to an earlier onset of menstruation in girls, putting them at a slightly higher risk for breast cancer and other chronic diseases. Finally, antibiotics administered to animals for rapid growth can expose humans to drug-resistant bacteria. To avoid these effects, be sure to read labels carefully when purchasing animal protein.

Dairy, an animal by-product, can be a good source of protein. However, it is an inflammatory food for many people. In fact, it's estimated that 75 percent of the world's population has a hard time digesting dairy. Physical challenges like sinus infections, eczema, and irritable bowel syndrome can be connected to a person's inability to properly digest dairy. Symptoms like bloating, flatulence, diarrhea, and constipation are common side effects of being lactose intolerant. Fortunately, a diet filled with fruits and vegetables—particularly leafy greens—will cover your calcium and basic vitamin and mineral needs.

### *Fats: Not All Are Created Equal*

When did *fat* become such a bad word? Before I talk about fat, a necessary macronutrient in food, I would like to talk about fat, the necessary grace that is found in our bodies. Fat is a part of God's glorious and

good design, and nobody on planet Earth could survive without some fat on their frame. If having fat makes us fat, then we are all *fat!*

Fats are not the absolute evil they are often made out to be. They are a necessary part of a healthy diet. They play a vital role in maintaining healthy skin and hair, insulating body organs against shock, regulating body temperature, and promoting healthy cell function. They also serve as energy stores for the body. Fat is a major source of energy and aids in the absorption of vitamins A, D, E, and K. Both animal-derived and plant-derived food products contain fat. When eaten in moderation, fats aid in proper growth, development, and maintenance of good health, particularly those found in God-created foods such as nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables, and legumes. Now before you run off to the corner doughnut store, consider the very real differences between good and bad fats.

**Good fats: polyunsaturated/monounsaturated.** Polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats may help lower your blood cholesterol levels. They are found in plant oils like olive oil, peanut oil, sunflower oil, and sesame oil. These oils come from vegetables and seeds that are pressed (preferably cold pressed since heat can destroy many of their beneficial enzymes). Other sources of good fats include avocados, peanut butter, and various nuts and seeds.

**Not-so-good fats: hydrogenated oils/saturated fats/trans fats.** Hydrogenated oils of any kind are not part of God's plan for healthy eating. The hydrogenation process turns liquid vegetable oil into solid fat. The goal of partial hydrogenation is to add hydrogen atoms to unsaturated fats to make them more saturated. These kinds of saturated fats have a higher melting point, making them very attractive for baking and extending the shelf life of baked goods.

Partially hydrogenated oils contain trans fat, which should be avoided. They lower your good cholesterol and raise your bad

cholesterol, thereby increasing your risk for heart disease. That is why we see manufacturers touting their products as “zero trans fats.”

*Be sure* to read your labels. Your best bet is to be sure that your food is free from partially (or fully) hydrogenated oils.

As you compare your options, remember that not all saturated fats are created equal—just as not all foods are created equal. The operative word here is *created*—food closest to its original source with minimal to no manufacturing or processing involved is best for your body. For example, coconut oil is a naturally occurring saturated fat that many believe is an exception to the “don’t eat saturated fat” rule. Unlike other saturated fats and trans fats, coconut oil can help establish healthy cholesterol levels.

In fact, what is true about fats is true of all food types: The closer a food is to its original design—free from artificial enhancers or machine processing—the better it is for you.



# RESPOND

*With All Your Heart*

Now that you have completed some simple health assessments, you can begin to move forward. But before you do so, I would like to help you lay a healthy foundation from which to start. This week's videos will help you train your core strength and stability, as well as your mobility. They will also talk about healthy posture and alignment. If you have struggled with excessive pain in your body before or after a workout, this week is truly going to help. Before we move more, let's move better! You can access the Wellness Revelation Workout Calendar on page 240.

## THE EATING PLAN

### *The Detox Fast*

Last week you were invited to participate in a standard fast: to get spiritually hungry for more of God by giving up the physical comfort of food for a period of time. This week, we will focus on retraining our taste buds. I would like to ask you to prayerfully consider taking a rest not from all food but from certain kinds of foods—white sugar, enriched flour, high-fructose corn syrup, and/or alcohol. You do not have to remove these all at once. Try to choose the one(s) that God is calling to your attention now. God never despises small steps.

If you remove this low-octane fuel from your life and replace it with high-octane fuel, I can promise that you will have more clarity and energy than you have had in a long time. You will also achieve weight loss at a consistent and natural pace.

This is an element fast, which removes from your diet those foods

that may have mastered you. Whatever you decide to fast from, let me encourage you to be all in! A lukewarm element fast will be filled with tedious temptation and “chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14). You will need to pray when you are faced with temptation. You will most likely find yourself praying a lot to loosen the bonds of your cravings. Be sure to call out for mercy and stay connected to the Vine because apart from Him you can do nothing (see John 15:5). Don’t forget: God loves a fast that is done with the right heart—one that wants to be transformed, obedient to the will of God.

Remember the reason you agreed to join the Wellness Revelation program: You desire to live a healthy and whole life so you are freed up to love yourself (in a healthy and righteous way) and to love others. This is an active and sacrificial process. You are the living sacrifice (see Romans 12:1). Always stay honest with God and surrender your strength to Him. Never doubt His greatness within you. He is stronger than any craving.

While you are detox fasting, eating will feel somewhat unfamiliar. You will experience some body rebellion, such as headaches, hunger, and cravings. Don’t panic. Keep your peace. A life lived according to the flesh doesn’t like newness unless it’s connected to more pleasure. The flesh is all about comfort, which it often seeks through pleasures of the flesh. However, your body is designed for homeostasis (equilibrium), making the various functions of the body interdependent on one another. When you give in to unhealthy pleasures of the flesh, the peaceful interplay of your body’s working systems breaks down.

Your body, soul, and spirit were created to work together. Before now, your soul (the seat of your appetites, dreams, and desires) and your body (the frame with the ability to execute these desires) have been running the show. They are used to getting what they want while your spirit (your desire to know God, love Him, and worship Him) has been accused of being insignificant and weak and forced by your flesh to sit down and shut up. But now, as we use this fast as a tool, your spirit is being asked to stand up and take its rightful place as the leader of the pack.

### *Phase One: Entering the Cocoon*

When my kids were small, one of their favorite books was *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, the story of a caterpillar doing what caterpillars do—eating good, naturally occurring foods like blueberries, strawberries, oranges, and plums. But the caterpillar is not satisfied with those foods. He stumbles upon and eats “chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon.”<sup>9</sup> Sound familiar? He’d gotten distracted, but he still had a chance to turn things around. This very fat caterpillar now built himself a cocoon.

We need cocoons occasionally. We need times to visit the dark places and do what is hard so that new and beautiful things can emerge. We never go into a cocoon alone, because we always go with God. In our rush to see and experience beauty, we often try to avoid struggle and suffering. But just as the caterpillar had to die to his old self and existence in order for his new life as a butterfly to begin, so must we. The time in the cocoon will be trying, but out of the trial will come true beauty.

For at least the next three days, I ask you to enter your own personal “cocoon” and fast from the element(s) you know God is putting His finger on. For some of you, the thought of going three days without [fill in the blank] makes your feet sweat and your stomach feel sick! You are on the right path to greater holiness and wholeness when you know you will need the Comforter to comfort you. Seek God’s heart when you long to give up and reach for your go-to comfort food. Remember that if you seek God with all your heart, you will find Him (see Jeremiah 29:13). And you may even find that God will give you the grace to go longer than three days—maybe even three weeks or three months. Who knows? The whole point is to become utterly dependent on the voice of Love to lead you and give you strength. You call, and He will answer.

## Food Suggestions List

### KEY

**Bold font = first choice**  
(the good fuel)

Regular font = second choice  
(when in doubt)

*Italics = third choice*  
(the cheap fuel)

### PROTEIN (portion aware)

**Baked beans (canned;**  
**be sugar aware)**

**Bison**

**Black-eyed peas**

**Canadian bacon**

**Chicken breast**

**Chickpeas**

**Eggs**

**Ground beef (lean,**  
**10–20 percent fat)**

**Ground turkey**

**Lamb**

**Lean beef**

**Lean deli ham**

**(hormone-free)**

**Lentils**

**Lima beans**

**Navy beans**

**Peas**

**Pinto beans**

**Pork**

**Sashimi**

**Seafood**

**Smoked salmon**

**Soybeans**

**Tofu**

**Turkey bacon**

**Turkey breast**

**Veal**

### DAIRY (portion aware)

Greek yogurt—unflavored

Milk substitutes (nut,  
rice, coconut)

### FRUITS (great snacks)

**Apples**

**Apricots**

**Bananas**

**Blackberries**

**Blueberries**

**Cherries**

**Grapefruit**

**Grapes**

**Kiwis**

**Lemons/limes**

**Mangoes**

**Oranges**

**Papayas**

**Peaches**

**Pears**

**Pineapples**

**Plums**

**Raspberries**

**Strawberries**

**All other fruits**

### BREAD/GRAIN

(portion aware)

**Barley**

**Bran/high-fiber**

**cereal**

**Brown basmati rice**

**Buckwheat**

**Bulgur**

**Kavli thin crackers**

**Muesli cereal**

**Oatmeal (old fashioned/  
steel cut)**

**Quinoa**

### **Sprouted breads**

(e.g. Ezekiel)

**Whole-grain high-fiber  
bread**

Whole-grain high-fiber  
tortillas

Whole-grain pita bread

### VEGETABLES

**Artichokes**

**Asparagus**

**Avocados**

**Beans**

**Beets**

**Bell peppers (all colors)**

**Broccoli**

**Brussels sprouts**

**Cabbage**

**Carrots**

**Cauliflower**

**Celery**

**Collard greens**

**Corn**

**Cucumbers**

**Edamame**

**Eggplant**

**Kale**

**Leeks**

**Lettuce (all leafy  
greens)**

**Mushrooms**

**Okra**

**Olives**

**Onions**

**Peppers, hot**

Pickles  
Potatoes  
(portion aware)  
Pumpkin  
Radishes  
Snow peas  
Spinach  
Squash  
Sweet potatoes  
(portion aware)  
Tomatoes  
Yams (portion aware)  
Zucchini  
All other vegetables

### CONDIMENTS

Garlic  
Herbs/spices  
Hummus  
Mayonnaise  
(portion aware)  
Mustard  
Parmesan cheese  
Raw honey  
(portion aware)  
Salsa  
Soy sauce, low sodium

Sriracha sauce  
Stevia  
Tabasco  
Teriyaki sauce  
(sugar aware)  
Vinegar (white,  
apple cider)  
Worcestershire sauce

### FATS/OILS (portion aware)

Almond butter—no  
added ingredients  
Canola oil  
Coconut oil  
Corn oil  
Flaxseed/flaxseed oil  
Hazelnuts  
Macadamia nuts  
Mayonnaise  
Natural nut butter  
(peanut, almond,  
cashew, etc.)—  
no added ingredients  
Olive oil  
Peanut oil

Salad dressing  
(sugar aware)  
Sesame oil  
Sunflower oil  
Vegetable oil  
**Vegetable oil sprays**  
All other nuts

### BEVERAGES

Water (filtered if needed)  
Decaffeinated coffee  
Decaffeinated tea

### FASTING

*High-fructose corn syrup/  
fructose*  
*Hydrogenated/partially  
hydrogenated oils*  
*Refined sugar (cookies,  
pastries, ice cream,  
frozen yogurt, etc.)*  
*White enriched flour*  
*Artificial sweeteners*  
*(the novel sweetener*  
*stevia is an exception;*  
*enjoy modestly)*  
*Alcohol*

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Remember: These are suggestions, not prescriptions. Please prayerfully submit the items and ideas listed here to the Lord, seeking His will for you in this time and in concert with the *whole* work He wants to do for and in you.

For some of you, this will be a call to greater self-control—for others it will be a call to looser self-regulation. He's got your answer.

If you have special dietary needs or concerns, please consult your health practitioner of choice.

In my distress I called to the LORD;  
I cried to my God for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice;  
my cry came before him, into his ears.

PSALM 18:6, NIV

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give  
you rest.

MATTHEW 11:28, ESV

Studies show that on average it takes around three weeks to break an old craving or habit and to start a new one. It takes up to three months before that new habit becomes established as a part of your daily life. God loves it when we follow Him into situations where we are totally dependent on Him.

For at least three days, with the God-supported hope of going three weeks, choose one or more elements that you sense the Lord is asking you to take a rest from in your daily diet:

A rest from sugar or anything sweet

A rest from hydrogenated oils and enriched flour (foods that are  
found in boxes or processed and passed through a window)

A rest from alcohol

Ask God when He is asking you to begin, and I am confident He will also tell you when to end your fast. Don't panic when your body throws a tantrum in all its various forms—headaches, irritability, and anxiety. That's exactly the time when things are getting good and you are closing in on some newfound freedom. Stay armored in His Word and in your cocoon until God says it's the right time to come out. He knows you want freedom. And He wants your freedom even more than

you do. Trust Him within your ugly, inner-child, tantrum moments. He's not offended by them.

### *How to Eat While Cocooning*

The Food Suggestions List on pages 76–77 is filled with a selection of high-octane fuel choices. I hope this gives you a jump start on the items you can stock in your cabinets as well as foods to look for when eating out. Keep in mind, vegetables and fruits are your very best friends. If a food is not on the list but grew out of the ground, by all means take a bite and enjoy it to the glory of God! *Disclaimer:* No one food plan can heal and meet the needs of all people, but eating whole, high-octane, minimally manhandled food is always a great place to start!

I would like to introduce you to a simple and sound way of nourishing your body; it's what I call the "4S" of feeding your body and soul.

1. *Slow.* Oh no. Now I've done it. I am asking you to slow down in a world that says, "Go faster! Do more! Be more!" Think of your slowing down to eat as a rebellious, joyful act of celebration. Slowing down in today's culture is *countercultural*. It's also the only hope you have for letting God have the right of way—for letting Him lead. He wants to fight this battle for you, but you will need to be still *before* your enemies as you move in a new direction (see Exodus 14:14).

Practice taking a moment to breathe and give thanks to God for what you are about to eat. Do this not as a robotic ritual but as a way to invite God in, to let Him sit at the head of your table and eat with you. Thank Him for making good on His promises to give you all you need so that you do not have to worry (see Matthew 6:31–33). Just take a moment to be grateful. I can promise you . . . a grateful heart is a full heart. It never wants for more.

2. *Sufficient.* If you classify yourself as an overeater, one of your challenges is not just what to eat but how much to put on your plate. The key word here is *plate*. Though I am not into scales and measurements, I encourage you to purchase some eight-inch plates if you don't already have them. Over the years, our increasing appetites have led to bigger and bigger plates, causing us to eat more than we need. Make it a habit to eat from a real plate. The act of “plating” a meal (even if it's just a sandwich and some veggie sticks) is an act of honoring God—the One who gives you food—as well as yourself as you take time to sit down, rest, refresh, and refuel.

So what should you put on your eight-inch plate? First divide it into thirds.

Fill one-third of your plate with a serving of lean, clean protein.

Fill one-third of your plate with a serving of a whole-grain carbohydrate.

Fill one-third of your plate with fruits and/or vegetables.

If you notice your body does better with less grain, then taper back for a meal or two. The same thing applies to meat. Supplement all of the above with a serving of “good fat” as desired (e.g., coconut oil to cook your eggs in; peanut butter on your toast; a side of avocado).

If you have difficulty determining serving sizes, feel free to pull out some measuring cups and spoons to get in touch with reality. But don't plan on hanging those suckers around your neck or carrying them in your purse. After a few days of reality checking, you and your sound, renewed mind will have a good idea of what a healthy portion size is. Here are some good guidelines:



Meats: A four-ounce serving is about the size of a deck of cards or the palm of your hand.

Whole grains: One cup is the size of your fist.

Vegetables: Two cups of raw, leafy vegetables is the size of two open hands.

Cooked vegetables: One cup equals one fist.

Fruit: One-half cup is about what fits in the cup of your palm.

Not all serving sizes are treated equally. For example, one average-sized apple is considered a serving. Though it won't necessarily fit in the palm of your hand, it can rest in there. Use your best judgment. And remember that it's nearly impossible to eat too many fruits and vegetables.

3. *Satisfied.* You may need to ask the Lord to awaken your sense of hunger and fullness. If you have used food over the years to feed the slightest pangs of hunger, your brain may have lost its ability to tell you when you are full. Praise God that He is the restorer of all things. Whatever the locusts ate, He will return (see Joel 2:25). As you slow down while eating, invite your good Father to tell you when you have had enough. *Countless* people have told me that God awakened their sense of fullness just because they asked. So go ahead . . . ask.

Use the Hunger Scale in your Moving Forward Journal. Remember that it is based on a scale of 1 to 5—1 being ravenously hungry and 5 being stuffed and needing to loosen your pants. Do your part to keep your hunger and satisfaction between a 2 and a 4 throughout your day. This is where eating steadily makes a difference.

Pay attention to your hunger. If you are finding you are still *very* hungry after eating a meal with a well-balanced plate of high-octane food for fuel, then you might be restricting your

food too much out of fear. Eating too many quality calories is rare, especially for those with weary and confused hearts who have battled weight their whole lives. Be free . . . be satisfied, and be not stuffed. Ask God for the grace to know the difference.

4. *Steady.* Make it a holy goal (to the best of your ability) to keep your blood sugar level. Radical spikes and plummets of blood sugar can be behind some of your most unpleasant binges.

Eat three meals a day with a snack in between as needed. This may seem like a lot of eating at first. If that's the case, it's likely that your metabolism has been suppressed by years of bingeing, restricting, and maybe even purging. Eating more steadily throughout the day is like throwing a log on a fire that you want to burn continually. By consistently feeding the fire of your metabolism with good and steady fuel, you will cleanse your body, soul, and mind from the gunk and leftover buildup that come from ravenous bingeing. Ask God to gently but firmly help you increase your desire to eat a little more steadily throughout the day.

If moments of high hunger or low energy occur, try eating every two to three hours by incorporating two snacks a day: one after breakfast and one after lunch. The snack can be as simple as a handful of nuts and some dried fruit. (Snacks don't require a plate, but please don't let me stop you from slowing down. I have been known to enjoy an apple and a peanut butter packet in my car, in a moment of silence.)

Make a conscious effort not to go to bed on a full stomach. Try to finish up your nourishment for the day within two to three hours of bedtime. Remember, there's a reason the first meal of the day is called *breakfast*. We eat to "break the fast" that started before we went to bed—not when we went to bed.

With that being said, don't push your bedtime back so you can stay up longer to eat. (I know how our crazy minds work.)

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

2 TIMOTHY 1:7, NKJV

### *Phase Two: Coming Out of the Cocoon*

If you do the full three weeks in your cocoon, complete weeks 4 and 5 in this book as you continue to fast from your chosen foods. In week 6, we will discuss the process of coming out of your cocoon.

If you come out sooner than three weeks, begin by celebrating God's goodness, and do not feel shame that you didn't get as far as three weeks. That shame game we play is part of what steals the health and wholeness that are ours as sons and daughters of God. If you are wondering what eating looks like now, turn to week 6, where "The Butterfly—Freedom" phase is covered in depth. Even if you have come out of your cocoon, be sure to continue working through weeks 4 and 5 in this book.

# RENEW

*With All Your Soul*

Set aside some disciplined and focused time this week to read, study, pray, and apply God's Word to your life.

1. Our lives can easily become too self-centered. Read Colossians 1:15-18. If we take this passage to heart, how will it correct our perspective? In what ways do you ensure that God is leading and directing your life?
2. Looking back, can you remember a time when you clearly desired something other than God's purpose for you? What happened?
3. Read John 5:30. Does this describe you right now? Are what you do and how you live purposefully aimed at pleasing God or pleasing yourself? What do you need to do to change your purpose to more closely line up with His purpose for you? Be as specific as possible.

4. If you believe you have been purposeful in pleasing God, what has happened in your life that has gotten you off track with your weight or health?
  
5. According to Genesis 1:28 (NIV), our purpose is to “be fruitful and increase in number.” Beyond procreation, this means we are to produce what is good. Does this describe your life? Why or why not?
  
6. Frederick Buechner said, “The vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world’s deep need meet.”<sup>10</sup> I believe that God has given each one of us an individual talent, gift, voice, vocation, passion, and desire for whatever brings us the greatest joy and can add value to His Kingdom. What gifts has God given to you? How well are you embodying the true peace and joy that comes in living according to the way He designed you?
  
7. If you are not sure of your purpose, or if you want to be sure that you are living completely in His will for your life, read Matthew 7:7-8. According to this passage, what do you need to do to find your purpose? Be persistent and continue to pray that God will reveal His deeper purpose for your life in Him.

## *Living Sacrifices for His Purpose*

8. We talked about the city of Corinth and how many people there used their bodies in ways that displeased the Lord. Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. To whom do our bodies belong?

9. What do you think it means to honor God with our bodies?

10. Just as Christ's body, the church, has many parts, so does your individual body. Your body consists of the physical (heart, lungs, skin, muscle, blood), the mental/emotional (thoughts and feelings), and the spiritual (the qualities that make you *you*; for example, living for His purpose). Each has a job to do that affects the whole. When you are not honoring God with your body (the physical element), how does that affect all other parts of your life—mental/emotional, social, and spiritual—and your ability to live out His purpose? Please address all areas and be specific:

Physical:

Mental/emotional:

Social:

Spiritual:

*Father,*

*Thank You for loving all of me. Now I give You not just my heart but my body too. I want more of You. I know that to make room for You, I need to allow less room for things without eternal value. I believe You care about all the details of my life, including what I put in my body and what I do with my body. Help me to turn to You when I am tempted to fill up on things that do not satisfy. Fill me instead with Your Word so that I may live according to Your good and pleasing will for my life. I desire to be healthy, whole, and free in body, soul, and spirit. Thank You that You want this for me too.*

*Amen.*

# RELATE

*With All Your Mind and Strength*

The following questions are designed to help you apply all you've learned this week to your fitness journey. Get with your accountability partner or small group and work honestly through these questions. Consider journaling your answers with God before sharing with your partner or group.

1. What food or foods have been mastering you?
2. If you cannot have the food(s) you want, what happens to your body? How do you feel? Be as specific as possible.
3. Describe a time in your life when food was a comfort to you.
4. Has food been serving you, or have you been serving food? If you have been serving food, what has it stolen from you?



# RECIPROCATE

*Fit for the Kingdom in Nigeria*

by Kari Jo Shephard,  
Revelation Wellness Ambassador

My family and I have been serving in Jos, Nigeria, for almost six years. My husband is a physician, our three boys attend an international school, and I teach fitness classes twice a week to missionaries and local Nigerians as a certified Revelation Wellness ambassador.

Two of my students are Hanatu, a teacher, and her daughter, Ladi, a high school student. Every Thursday afternoon for the past year, they have faithfully entered a classroom of a different variety—the room where we meet for our Kingdom Fit workouts. In this classroom, they are active and vibrant participants. Not only do they exercise, they enter God’s presence through movement, God’s Word, and prayer.

One particular Thursday just before class, my mind and heart were not very excited about the prospect of leading a class intended to uplift and encourage people. I had been struggling through a rough week. But out of a sense of obligation I went, and I started class as I always do—by reading Scripture and praying for God to speak to us through our time in movement and worship. I read the day’s Scripture, Psalm 30:11 (NIV), which was the cry of my heart: “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.” After I’d finished, I decided to open up about the week I’d had, explaining that I didn’t truly *want* to be there but was trusting God to turn my wailing

into dancing and to clothe me with joy. I invited the students to join me in this plea for the Lord to transform our attitudes.

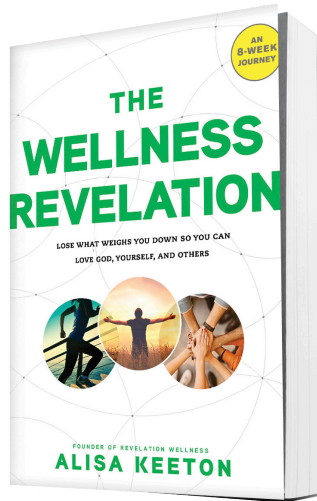
Class went on as normal, and thankfully I sensed joy developing inside me as I continued to move and focus on the Lord. We all worked up quite a sweat before beginning the cooldown.

After class we make cleaning the room a community event. We close windows and curtains, roll up mats, and gather our belongings together. As we were putting everything away, Ladi approached me. Though usually a very quiet and reserved young woman, she began to open up about how she was struggling due to her brother attending university in another country. She told me how much she missed him and that she had been feeling depressed. Since attending Kingdom Fit classes, however, she had been greatly encouraged and was feeling much better about the situation. When Hanatu came over to get her daughter, she also told me how encouraged she had been to hear about my tough week because she had been having a similar experience. She was glad to know she wasn't alone in her struggles.

Heaven came down to earth that day. God knew our hearts and what they needed, and true to form, He did not disappoint us. He met each of us in our need and *turned our wailing into dancing and clothed each of us with His great joy!* Whether students share what God is doing or not, I know He is at work through each class and in every heart. God is in the business of encouraging and drawing all of us into deeper relationship with Him.

#### ENDNOTES

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8. Latetia V. Moore and Frances E. Thompson, "Adults Meeting Fruit and Vegetable Intake Recommendations—United States, 2013," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 64, no. 26 (July 10, 2015): 709–713.
9. Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (New York: Philomel Books, 1994), 15.
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# HAPPINESS

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**WHILE CHRISTIANS SHOULDN'T** deny or ignore suffering, we should be so energized by contagious joy and radiate such inner happiness, peace, and contentment that others are attracted to what we have in Christ. Yet Christians are often perceived as angry, judgmental, and duty driven.

Why aren't we happier?

Unfortunately, many believers are taught that God wants us to be holy but not happy and that joy and happiness are fundamentally different. We've even been left with the impression that God himself isn't happy. Yet nothing could be further from the truth!

Join bestselling author and noted theologian Randy Alcorn as he dispels the modern Christian misconceptions about happiness and provides indisputable biblical proof that God not only wants us to be happy but commands and empowers us to be happy in him!



**RANDY ALCORN** is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries and a *New York Times* bestselling author of over fifty books, including *Heaven* (over one million sold). His books sold exceed ten million copies and have been translated into over seventy languages. Randy resides in Gresham, Oregon, with his wife, Nanci, and their happy golden retriever, Maggie.

## CHAPTER 3

# Does God Want Us to Be Happy?

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*Sing, Jerusalem. Israel, shout for joy! Jerusalem,  
be happy and rejoice with all your heart.*

ZEPHANIAH 3:14, NCV

*God made human beings as He made  
His other creatures, to be happy. . . .  
They are in their right element when they are happy.*

CHARLES SPURGEON

In my novel *Safely Home*, I tell the story of two Harvard roommates reunited in China twenty years after graduation. One is American businessman Ben Fielding, an entrepreneur in international high-tech corporate partnerships. The other is Li Quan, a brilliant academic who, when Ben last saw him, was headed home to be a professor at a Chinese university.

When Ben reconnects with Li Quan on a business trip to China, he's shocked to find his old friend living in poverty, working as a locksmith's assistant, and involved with a house church often raided by the police. Shortly after the two become reacquainted, Quan is imprisoned. Yet

even in prison, to Ben's astonishment, Quan remains cheerful, trusting God and rejoicing in his goodness despite enduring cruel treatment.

The longer Ben stays in China and the more time he spends with Li Quan and his wife and son, the more he envies his old friend. Even with everything he has going for him and everything working against Quan, Ben realizes he wishes he could trade places with his former roommate. Why? Because Quan has what Ben doesn't: love and happiness.

Li Quan drew his happiness from God, who was with him even in prison. Ben Fielding attempted to find happiness in everything the world had to offer . . . and failed miserably.

## **HAPPINESS IS GOD'S COMMAND—AND A PLEASANT CALLING—FOR HIS PEOPLE.**

C. S. Lewis said, "It is a Christian duty . . . for everyone to be as happy as he can."<sup>1</sup> Happiness is a privilege. However, since God repeatedly calls upon us to rejoice, delight, and be glad in him, we have an obligation to actually do so.

This makes sense only if the God we love is happy, if the gospel message we embrace and proclaim is happy, and if Heaven is a happy place. It makes sense if we understand that people long to be happy and won't turn to Jesus if they believe there's no happiness in him. Others will judge whether there's happiness in Jesus by whether they see happiness in his followers. Hence, our happiness is, indeed, a Christian duty.

But what an incredibly wonderful responsibility it is . . . like being required to eat Mom's apple pie! We're accustomed to thinking of duty as drudgery, not happiness. But a person's duty to love his or her spouse or to care for a son or daughter, and a soldier's duty to defend his country—when done with the right heart and perspective—all bring satisfaction, contentment, and happiness.

Paul's words in Philippians 4:4 are often translated "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." They could also be translated, "Be

happy in the Lord always, and again I say be happy.” Commenting on this verse, Spurgeon said, “It is intended that we should be happy. That is the meaning . . . that we should be cheerful.”<sup>2</sup>

This passage commands us twice to be glad in God. A command carries with it the duty to obey, and when it’s repeated, that expectation is intensified. Fortunately, when God commands us to rejoice, his Holy Spirit empowers us to obey.

God could have stated, “You have cause to rejoice.” But a command is different from a statement. A command doesn’t leave us the option to passively wait for joy, hoping it comes to us. Rather, we must take action to lay hold of joy in God.

The command to be sexually pure and abstain from immorality requires proactive choices (see 1 Thessalonians 4:3). Similarly, to glorify God in all we do, love our neighbor, care for our families, help the poor, and resolve conflicts requires actions on our part. The same is true of the command to rejoice.

The fact that “rejoice” is followed by “always” and is repeated (“*again* I say rejoice”) makes it one of the most emphatic directives in Scripture. If our lives are not characterized by rejoicing, or if we’ve given up on happiness, we’re missing out on what God intends for us. We must go to him and ask for his help and empowerment to find joy in him.

Only if we truly want to experience the happiness-driven desires of our hearts will we be drawn to God by verses such as this: “Seek your happiness in the LORD, and he will give you your heart’s desire” (Psalm 37:4, GNT). Judging by what we hear, we might expect Scripture to say, “Obey God, and say no to your heart’s desire.” Not so!

Jesus says, “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24, ESV).

The Contemporary English Version and God’s Word Translation both render the final clause in John 16:24 this way: so that we will be “completely happy.”



Can our joy be full if we're not happy? No.

The CEV, a translation from the original biblical languages (not a paraphrase), says:

- Be happy and shout to God who makes us strong! (Psalm 81:1)
- Be happy and excited! You will have a great reward in heaven.  
(Matthew 5:12)

The Bible clearly *commands* us to be happy. “But that’s just one English version,” someone might say. Correct. But every other version echoes the same command even when using other words. The CEV isn’t alone in its translation of these and similar passages. The Good News Translation says:

- Be happy with your wife and find your joy with the woman you married. (Proverbs 5:18)
- Go ahead—eat your food and be happy; drink your wine and be cheerful. It’s all right with God. (Ecclesiastes 9:7)
- Be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep.  
(Romans 12:15)

You may not be accustomed to thinking that God commands us to be happy. But it’s a fact. And I’m betting it’s a command most of us would like to obey!

Some have an intuitive resistance to the notion that happiness is unbiblical, and so we should. A blogger says, “Happiness isn’t in the Bible? But what about all the commands to rejoice? What about laughter? Please tell me I’m not supposed to always be heavy-hearted, trudging along and begrudging obedience. I want to be a happy Christian!”<sup>3</sup>

## SCRIPTURE CONFIRMS THAT GOD WANTS US HAPPY.

I've studied more than 2,700 Scripture passages where words such as *joy, happiness, gladness, merriment, pleasure, celebration, cheer, laughter, delight, jubilation, feasting, exultation, and celebration* are used. Throw in the words *blessed* and *blessing*, which often connote happiness, and the number increases.

God is clear that seeking happiness—or joy, gladness, delight, or pleasure—through sin is wrong and fruitless. But seeking happiness in him is good and right.

The ESV, which I most often cite in this book, doesn't use the word *happy* nearly as often as many translations, but it's still there:

- Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? (Deuteronomy 33:29)
- Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy. (1 Kings 4:20)
- Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! (1 Kings 10:8)
- How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness. (Isaiah 52:7)

Even without the word *happiness*, the concept is unmistakable in passages such as these:

- Enjoy life with the wife whom you love. (Ecclesiastes 9:9)
- All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast. (Proverbs 15:15)

Most translations render the phrase “cheerful of heart” or “cheerful heart.” Two say “glad heart,” and one says “gladness of heart.” Four,

including the King James Version, say “merry heart.” Five, including the New Living Translation, render it “happy heart.” Which is correct? All of them. These words are synonyms.

Even Jeremiah, who’s called “the weeping prophet” since he was brokenhearted over the tragic suffering of God’s people, spoke prophecies of happiness. He saw the future—some of it in this world’s Jerusalem and much of it in the New Jerusalem to come—and in it he was given glimpses of God’s promised happiness:

Hear the word of the LORD. . . . [My people] will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD. . . . They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

JEREMIAH 31:10, 12-13, NIV

That’s a lot of joy for a weeping prophet!

Consider the Psalms, which reflect both great sorrow and great happiness:

- I will be happy and rejoice in you! I will sing praises to you, O sovereign One! (Psalm 9:2, NET)
- You will fill me with joy when I am with you. You will make me happy forever at your right hand. (Psalm 16:11, NIRV)
- God, your love is so precious! . . . [People] eat the rich food in your house, and you let them drink from your river of pleasure. (Psalm 36:7-8, NCV)
- I will go to your altar, O God; you are the source of my happiness. I will play my harp and sing praise to you, O God, my God. (Psalm 43:4, GNT)

As Jeremiah and Jesus wept, we, too, will sometimes weep—and so we should. But if we're not experiencing happiness in God, then we're not obeying God's commands and we're missing out on the abundant life Jesus came to give us (see John 10:10).

## **MODERN CHRISTIANS NEED TO SPEAK MORE, NOT LESS, ABOUT HAPPINESS.**

Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) said, “Let us leave sadness to the devil and his angels. As for us, what can we be but rejoicing and glad?”<sup>4</sup>

I talked with a young woman who viewed the Christian life as one of utter dullness. She knew that following Christ was the right thing to do, but she was certain it would mean sacrificing her happiness.

Unless her view changes dramatically, her spiritual future is bleak. It isn't in our nature to continually say no to what we believe would make us happy—or to say yes to something that would make us unhappy. (Don't mistake perseverance for choosing unhappiness—the man who faithfully loves his wife suffering from dementia is not choosing unhappiness but rather choosing the happiness of honoring his wife, keeping his vows, and hearing God's “well done.”)

So where did this young woman, who was raised in a fine Christian family and church, acquire such an unbiblical notion? What are we doing—what are we missing—that leaves many of our children and our churches laboring under such false impressions? Why do we think it would be unspiritual for the Christian life to be centered on what God calls the good news of happiness?

Celebration and gladness of heart have characterized the church, including the suffering church, throughout history. Scripturally, the culture of God's people is one of joy, happiness, gratitude, eating and drinking, singing and dancing, and making music. It's not the people who know God who have reason to be miserable—it's those who *don't*.

When our face to the world is one of anger, misery, shame, cowardice,

or defensiveness, the gospel we speak of doesn't appear to be the good news of happiness. And we shouldn't be surprised if people, both outside and inside the church, aren't attracted to it. *Why should they be?*

## **JOY AND LAUGHTER SHOULD BE THE CHURCH'S NORM, NOT THE EXCEPTION.**

Children who grow up seeing church as a morose, hypercritical place will turn their backs on it in their quest for happiness. Those who have found happiness in the church will usually stay or return.

Sadly, many non-Christian young adults today view Christ's followers as "hypocritical," "insensitive," and "judgmental."<sup>5</sup> These words all describe unhappy people. (If the world judges us, so be it, but it shouldn't be because we're chronically unhappy.)

It seems to me there are two extremes of Christians when it comes to happiness. Some change the channel from the coverage of a hurricane, refuse to think about sex trafficking and abortion, and ignore the sufferings of this world while grabbing on to superficial living. They look the other way when their marriages are in trouble or when their children choose wrong friends, yet they keep claiming Jesus' promise of easy lives without suffering. (Never mind that Jesus never made such a promise!)

Other Christians are perpetually somber, never laughing or poking fun at themselves, rarely celebrating, and quick to frown when they see someone having fun. Shoulders sagging, they believe that happiness is ungodliness.

The Bible presents a more balanced perspective. Paul said he was "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10, ESV). Sorrow and joy can and do coexist, for now. (Note that the "always" in this verse is applied to rejoicing, not being sorrowful.)

If we constantly focus on all that's wrong with the world, then sorrow or anger will be our default. But the apostle Paul, writing from

prison in Rome, calls on us to rejoice in the Lord not periodically, but always.

It's not insensitive, unkind, or wrong to be happy. By being happy in Christ, we lay claim to the fact that God is bigger than the Fall and affirm that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will reverse the Curse and reign over a new universe. Our happiness shouts that our God is present with us and at work in the world every minute of every hour of every day. The narrower our view of God's presence in this world—and in our daily lives—the less happiness we'll experience.

Parents repeat instructions to children because kids tend to miss it the first time. Hence Paul said, "Again I will say, rejoice" (Philippians 4:4, *ESV*). He wanted to make sure we'd get it. Synonyms for happiness appear repeatedly throughout Scripture. If God says it enough, shouldn't we get it? Still, most of us have failed to notice the cumulative force of the biblical revelation that we are to be consistently happy in God.

## **GROWING IN OUR HAPPINESS IN CHRIST IS A PROCESS.**

The bride of Christ matures incrementally. As we "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18, *ESV*), we grow in joy.

Paul depicted the gradual process of growth in Christlikeness this way: "We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18, *NIV*). With ever-increasing glory comes ever-increasing happiness in our Lord. Sin loses its hold on us—largely because we see the misery it brings. We begin to ask ourselves, "How could I believe for a moment that sin could bring me happiness?"

We also learn from adversity. When our perspective and our faith are put to the test, our happiness can flourish. That's why so many passages

surprise us by connecting rejoicing with trials (see James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-9; Hebrews 10:34).

## **OUR PURSUIT OF GENUINE HAPPINESS IN GOD HONORS HIM.**

When Puritan Jonathan Edwards was only nineteen years old, he made a resolution that speaks volumes: “Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigour, and vehemence . . . I am capable of.”<sup>6</sup>

Like most of the Puritans, Richard Sibbes did not demean the quest for happiness; rather, he saw Jesus as the proper object of that quest: “Only to a true Christian, by a supernatural light, is discovered both the right object, and the right way to felicity.”<sup>7</sup>

In the movie *The Stepford Wives*, husbands program “perfect” wives. Of course, these robotic wives are perfect only in the sense that they do whatever their husbands want. But what any good man really desires is a relationship with a real person who responds out of heartfelt love and happiness. Fake, programmed love or happiness is empty—in fact, it’s unreal. God doesn’t force happiness on us. He invites us to enter his happiness and find it in him.

C. S. Lewis said, “The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water.”<sup>8</sup>

In 2014, Victoria Osteen, wife of megachurch pastor Joel Osteen, made a statement that went viral and was highly criticized on hundreds of Christian blogs. She said,

I just want to encourage every one of us to realize when we obey God, we’re not doing it for God—I mean, that’s one way

to look at it—we’re doing it for ourselves, because God takes pleasure when we’re happy. . . . That’s the thing that gives Him the greatest joy. . . . Just do good for your own self. Do good because God wants you to be happy. . . . When you come to church, when you worship Him, you’re not doing it for God really. You’re doing it for yourself, because that’s what makes God happy. Amen?<sup>9</sup>

She didn’t get many amens online. The statement “When we obey God, we’re not doing it for God” is certainly misguided. Whatever we do, we should do it out of love for God (see Matthew 22:37), fear of God (see 1 Peter 2:17), a desire to glorify God (see 1 Corinthians 10:31), and a longing to please God (see 1 John 3:22).

But had Victoria Osteen said, “When we obey God we do it first for him, but *also* for ourselves,” that would be biblical. We should seek to please and find pleasure in God, and we’re right to oppose the superficial self-centered happiness of prosperity theology. But we’re wrong to suppose that God doesn’t care about our happiness.

Most critics failed to recognize the nugget of truth in her statement. Obeying God and worshiping him really *should* make us happy! And God finds pleasure in that kind of happiness. “Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant” (Psalm 135:3, NKJV). Whom is it pleasant for? Hopefully for God, but the inspired text speaks of *our* pleasure in worshiping God.

## **SCRIPTURE’S GOOD NEWS IS OF “GREAT JOY,” NOT “GREAT DUTY.”**

Mike Mason writes, “No one would become a Christian if this hard decision were not accompanied by stupendous joy.”<sup>10</sup>

The Puritans, never accused of being trendy, talked a great deal about Christian happiness. Scottish theologian Samuel Rutherford



(1600–1661) wrote to Lady Kenmure, “I have neither tongue nor pen to express to you the happiness of such as are in Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

Baptist pastor Octavius Winslow (1808–1878) said, “The child of God is, from necessity, a joyful man. His sins are forgiven, his soul is justified, his person is adopted, his trials are blessings, his conflicts are victories, his death is immortality, his future is a heaven of inconceivable, unthought-of, untold, and endless blessedness—with such a God, such a Saviour, and such a hope, is he not, ought he not, to be a *joyful* man?”<sup>12</sup> It was a rhetorical question—who could possibly have more reason to rejoice than one who knows Jesus?

When the gospel is viewed primarily as laying burdens and obligations on people, the Good News gets buried. Burdens and obligations are not good news; good news is about liberation, deliverance, new-found delight, and daily celebration. Sure, duty is real and the gospel calls us to a life of obedience, but it’s *glad* duty and *joyful* obedience.

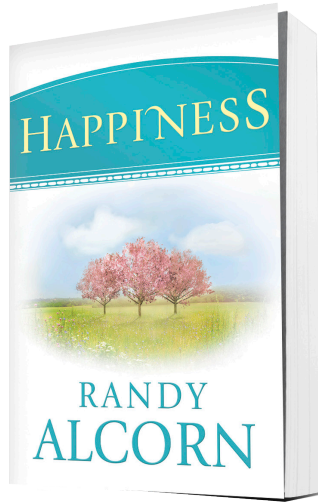
There’s an age-old tradition of Christ-followers who have found their deepest happiness in their Lord. We should eagerly join them and say with English Puritan John Flavel (1627–1691), “Christ [is] the very essence of all delights and pleasures, the very soul and substance of them. As all the rivers are gathered into the ocean . . . so Christ is that ocean in which all true delights and pleasures meet.”<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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God is happy, and he wants us to be happy too. The day has not yet come when God will wipe away every tear from his children's eyes, but rest assured, that day will come. Until then, this definitive work by Randy Alcorn can help change the way you think about joy and happiness.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/happiness/9781414389349>

# 24/6

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## **REMEMBER THE SABBATH.**

It's the only commandment that begins with the word remember—almost as if God knew we would forget.

Well, guess what?

We did.

And is it any wonder? Look around. Thanks to ever-improving technology, we now feel the pressure to be “on” twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Sure, things like smart phones, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and Skype help us stay connected with coworkers, family, and friends—but what about God?

In *24/6*, Dr. Matthew Sleeth provides a life-giving prescription for a healthier, more God-centered life amidst a digitally crazed, always-on world.



**MATTHEW SLEETH, MD**, a former emergency room physician, felt like he was straightening deck chairs on the *Titanic* saving one patient at a time while the whole ship (Earth) was going down. Following a new calling, Dr. Sleeth resigned from his position as chief of the medical staff and director of a busy ER to teach, preach, and write about faith and the environment throughout the country. Matthew's first book, *Serve God, Save the Planet* was selected as a finalist for a 2008 *Christianity Today* award in the Christianity & Culture category. He also wrote the introduction to HarperOne's Green Bible. Dr. Sleeth lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with his wife Nancy.

## CHAPTER 7

# It's about Time

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*I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations  
on those who love me and obey my commands.*

EXODUS 20:6, NLT (from the second of the Ten Commandments)

I met Naomi on a Tuesday evening. Her mother drove her straight from the high school. Naomi had been at field hockey practice when her left arm and shoulder started hurting—again. She sat on a stretcher, a sixteen-year-old somewhat out of place in the main bay of our department.

I love the unspoken language that passes between parents and children who care about one another. Like the pull of heavy rare-earth magnets, yet stronger and softer, it always draws them closer. Naomi radiated wholesomeness and youth.

Her mother told me that Naomi had started experiencing pain in her left arm at the beginning of the school year. Maybe it was worse with activity; it was hard to tell. She had seen a nurse-practitioner and been advised to use ibuprofen three times a day. Maybe that helped, but the pain came back. They saw the nurse-practitioner two more times and were referred to a physical therapist.

Was the therapy helping? No. Had they gotten an X-ray? No. Had the pain ever woken Naomi from sleep? Yes. Any cough? No. Night sweats? No. Weight loss? No.

“She hurt so much when she was at practice today, she was almost in tears,” her mother said as I pushed on Naomi’s shoulder. Yet there was no pain with palpating or putting the shoulder through the range of motion. Naomi seemed embarrassed by the lack of symptoms, like when the strange noise in my car cannot be reproduced in front of the mechanic. But I believed every word.

I took the stethoscope slung around my neck and placed the diaphragm on Naomi’s back. Listening as hard as I could, I heard nothing wrong. The lung fields on the left matched those on the right. Her face was symmetrical, and there was no drooping eyelid. Still, my stomach fell away. Everything about this case felt wrong. “Let’s get a chest X-ray,” I suggested. Maybe my facial mask wasn’t as impenetrable as I had thought: they didn’t ask why I was x-raying the chest instead of her shoulder.

I saw a few other patients while Naomi was getting her X-ray, then put the film up to view. In the left upper lobe of her lung sat an ugly, softball-size tumor.

Naomi died a few months after I met her. She had less life than the threescore and ten years the Bible allots. What did she do in those final days? What does anyone do who has only a year, a month, or a day left?

If they live until they are eighty, Naomi’s parents will think about her every single day. Although the pain will lessen over time, it will never go away. They will grow old, but she will be forever young. Each year, they become more convinced that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was right about having loved and lost.

This is a book about the Sabbath, and the Sabbath and the Fourth Commandment are about time. Unlike many other religious systems, the Judeo-Christian one is intimately concerned with time. We do not believe that the clock of the universe forever resets itself. We believe there was a beginning, and there will be an end. Time is valuable.

## ONE DAY EQUALS ONE WEEK AND OTHER TIME PARADOXES

The Bible has always told us that time is relative, but it wasn't until Albert Einstein and George Hubble came along that we had the scientific evidence to confirm it. Throughout most of history, we had no framework to show that time changes when viewed through different lenses, but this truth has been evident since the first book of the Bible.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus said, "I come quickly" (Revelation 22:20, KJV). Two thousand years ago! What did he mean? If Jesus will be back in a flash, then what were Gabriel and Mary talking about? When Gabriel foretold the birth of John the Baptist, he said John would "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children" (Luke 1:17, NLT), meaning that the current generation would stop thinking so much about itself. Three times in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55, NLT) Mary refers to God's blessings flowing from generation to generation. In this, she echoes the warning and the promise in the Ten Commandments. Children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren pay for their parents' hatred of the Lord, but the Lord says, "I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands" (Exodus 20:6). How can we have a thousand generations and close the show up tomorrow?

Genesis opens with the heavens and the earth being made in seven days. Genesis 2:4 says, "These are the *generations* of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the *day* that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens" (ESV, italics mine). This paradox is written into the Hebrew Bible, the King James Version, and the English Standard Version, though some of the Bibles on my shelf have worded it differently because the translators could not get their minds around it. (Bible translators don't always keep up with physics.) Rabbinical scholars of old have struggled with this paradox for centuries. Seven days, generations, a day: which is it?

Such literary paradoxes are intentionally used by the author of



Genesis (God) to shake readers (us humans) by the shoulders and make a point. In Genesis 2:4, the point is not a day, a generation, or a week. The point is that God is the inventor of time. He is the author of life, the universe, and eternity. But God is not bound by time as we are.

## **THINKING MORE LIKE A CHILD**

When we are young, we don't know what day it is. We don't know where we are or where we're going. We live attuned to the ticking of our stomachs and dream the secret dreams of babies. We listen to lullabies and the rhythmic sounds of cars. We hear the birds others are too busy to notice. Time seems endless. Eternity stretches between birthdays. Are we there yet?

When Jesus said we have to become like children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, was he referring to a child's sense of time? Was he pointing us to that period of our lives when we could live in the moment? Was he referring to the wonderment that allowed us to notice the moon in the middle of the day? How long has it been since you were fascinated by your shadow? It mesmerized you the first time you noticed it, yet you probably pay it no mind now. Did it lose its wonder, or did you lose your wonderment? And if you can't even see your shadow, how are you going to see God working in your life?

Jesus tells us to "take no thought" for what we wear, eat, or drink (Matthew 6:25, KJV). How do we reconcile that with planning for our children's college educations? How in good faith can we follow a homeless Savior and sign a thirty-year mortgage? How do we "take no thought" for what we eat but believe that "those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith . . . [and] are worse than unbelievers" (1 Timothy 5:8, NLT)?

The Bible is not for simpletons. Those who try to make it so risk taking the faith away from those who actively engage their brains. Likewise, those who dissect, parse, and study the Bible to death can kill the faith

of children; it would be better for them to throw themselves in a lake with a stone around their necks.

## FINDING A REFERENCE POINT TO MAKE IT CLEAR

Let's make sense of Jesus telling us that he will come soon *and* Gabriel, Mary, and God telling us to think long term. Let's find the ground between giving no thought to what we eat and planting trees for our grandchildren.

In order to do this, we must get a handle on time. There is no better place to start than Psalm 90, a song attributed to Moses. Like most of the Psalms, it has a key phrase, a takeaway point to remember if you recall nothing else. Because the Psalms can lose much in modern translations, I give you the modern New Living Translation for clarity's sake side by side with the King James Version for poetry's sake. Choose one and write it on the fleshy tablet of your heart:

### *Psalm 90*

#### NEW LIVING TRANSLATION

Lord, through all the generations  
you have been our home!  
Before the mountains were born,  
before you gave birth to the earth and the world,  
from beginning to end, you are God.

You turn people back to dust, saying,  
"Return to dust, you mortals!"  
For you, a thousand years are as a passing day,  
as brief as a few night hours.  
You sweep people away like dreams that disappear.  
They are like grass that springs up in the morning.  
In the morning it blooms and flourishes,

but by evening it is dry and withered.  
We wither beneath your anger;  
we are overwhelmed by your fury.  
You spread out our sins before you—  
our secret sins—and you see them all.  
We live our lives beneath your wrath,  
ending our years with a groan.

Seventy years are given to us!  
Some even live to eighty.  
But even the best years are filled with pain and trouble;  
soon they disappear, and we fly away.  
Who can comprehend the power of your anger?  
Your wrath is as awesome as the fear you deserve.  
Teach us to realize the brevity of life,  
so that we may grow in wisdom.

O LORD, come back to us!  
How long will you delay?  
Take pity on your servants!  
Satisfy us each morning with your unfailing love,  
so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives.  
Give us gladness in proportion to our former misery!  
Replace the evil years with good.  
Let us, your servants, see you work again;  
let our children see your glory.  
And may the Lord our God show us his approval  
and make our efforts successful.  
Yes, make our efforts successful!

*Psalm 90*

KING JAMES VERSION

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst  
formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting  
to everlasting, thou art God.

Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children  
of men.

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is  
past, and as a watch in the night.

Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the  
morning they are like grass which groweth up.

In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is  
cut down, and withereth.

For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we  
troubled.

Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light  
of thy countenance.

For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years  
as a tale that is told.

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason  
of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength  
labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy  
fear, so is thy wrath.

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts  
unto wisdom.

Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy  
servants.

O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad  
all our days.

Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us,  
and the years wherein we have seen evil.

Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their  
children.

And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish  
thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our  
hands establish thou it.

For many, the most memorable phrase is line twelve: “Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom” (NLT)/”Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (KJV).

Foolish people are the ones who act like the ride never stops. They do not take the time to contemplate the limitation of “threescore years and ten.” They think they will get out of this life alive. For them, Jesus does come quickly. No one’s personal end time is far off.

This psalm opens with a reminder: God is in business for eternity. He has always been and always will be, and if we want to know him better, we had better develop a perspective that sees beyond our short horizon. We serve a God with more than a five-year plan. In order to resonate with the eternal character of God, we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work fixing up the place.

This psalm asks God to renew joy and faith each morning. It does not ask God to banish all pain and suffering; instead, it seeks a balance. Give us gladness in proportion to the hard times, it says. There are seasons in life. There are rhythms to be lived. It does not dish out a saccharine-sweet faith from a church entertainer illustrating five easy steps to spiritual riches. Instead, Psalm 90 beseeches us to see the Lord’s hand at work throughout every day, month, and year of our lives.

## TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

It stands to reason that the devil is not happy about the Fourth Commandment. His object is to rid the world of all the Ten Commandments, starting with the top ones.

When the French revolted in 1789, they attempted to throw out God and king. The king lives in the palace—off with his head. God dwells in the Sabbath—get rid of the seven-day week. For a dozen years, the French adopted a ten-day week. It failed, along with the French Revolution.

In 1929, the Russians revolted against God and czar. Instead of adopting the French ten-day week, they switched to five-day workweeks. Their efforts to throw out the Sabbath also failed.

A new tactic is being employed today. It is called 24/7.

I started life with Sabbath. In the home I grew up in, we went to church on Sundays, but by the time I was in my twenties, I had sworn off sentimental and superstitious things like God. I met Nancy when she was eighteen. She was from a Jewish family. They lit candles on Friday evenings—a traditional way of welcoming the Sabbath—but her practice did not extend beyond reciting a few Hebrew blessings and sharing a family meal.

We married against our parents' wishes. I went to college and then medical school. We had children. We pursued the state religion of success. We were good at it, and we climbed up rungs of the ladder. We built a nice home. We made and saved money.

Our children grew up with all the holidays and none of the pesky problems associated with genuine faith—things like surrender, service, and sacrifice. They seemed to cope with the amalgamation and confusion. At Christmastime, they thought that the Fiddler on the Roof slid down the chimney, and if he saw his shadow, he left Hanukkah candy beside the carrots we'd left out for the reindeer.

More than a decade into my career, I started working at a hospital

where they put me in charge. Not wanting to take advantage of my position, I gave the scheduling duties to another doctor. She signed me up to work every Sunday for a year while she took every Sunday off. She somehow reasoned that since she and her husband didn't have children and I did, I couldn't possibly mind.

That time of life was difficult. It was filled with loss and tragedy. I realized for the first time that there was evil afoot in the world. To quote Dante, "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to my senses in a dark forest, for I had lost the straight path."

Because of my work schedule, I began taking every Saturday off. This wasn't for any spiritual reason, but merely to shepherd strength for the next day's twenty-four-hour shift. I decided not to go shopping or do projects around the house and instead took walks, read, and rested. I also sought answers in new places. Most of the books I had read were silent on the subjects of good and evil, so I began investigating the world's great sacred texts, starting with the Hindu epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Then one slow Sunday afternoon at the hospital, I spotted a Bible on a waiting room table. I picked it up. I had never read it, and we didn't have one at home. So I stole it.

I studied the New Testament and encountered Jesus. My life has never been the same.

I tell this story not to illustrate my conversion to Christianity, but to show what can happen when someone stops working one day a week—and goes knocking on the doors of faith. "Seek, and you will find," says Jesus (Matthew 7:7, *ESV*). But one must first have the time to seek.

I believe that God gave the Fourth Commandment so that we could grapple with the number of our days. When I slowed to a stop, I became intensely curious about what happens—spiritually, not just physically—when someone dies. I wanted to know if life mattered. I began to number my days.

## REST, RENEWAL, AND REVERENCE

How does one balance a world formed in seven days, generations, and a week? My experience has shown that this happens best on the Sabbath. Believers of old said that if everyone kept the Sabbath, time itself would cease. The river of time would freeze, and we would see God.

My Saturday “Stop Days” launched me on a journey toward the three Rs of Sabbath: rest, renewal, and reverence. In Sabbath keeping, we rest from more than our labors. We rest from the tyranny of the urgent, the staggering precipice of eternity, and the mundane workweek.

In the Sabbath’s renewal, we catch a glimpse of the divine. And our response to the divine is reverence.

Rest, renewal, and reverence all take time. And if time is money, then how much time will a lifetime of Sabbath keeping cost? In what turns out to be another paradox, it may not cost anything. Sabbath keeping may be free, and it’s been scientifically studied.

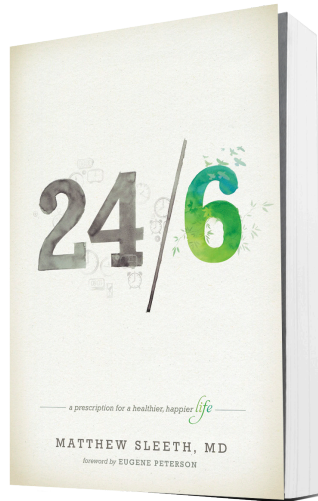
In *The Blue Zones*, author Dan Buettner looked for groups around the world who lived longer and healthier lives. The groups he identified lived about a dozen years longer on average than the general population. All the groups did the kinds of things you’d expect. They didn’t smoke or eat a diet high in animal fat. They walked a lot. They valued family and relationships.

In the United States, the community that met Buettner’s criteria was in Loma Linda, California—the Seventh-day Adventists. Adventists are Sabbath keepers. On average, the cohort in Loma Linda lives about a dozen years longer than the rest of America. If you multiply the number of Sabbaths they observe per year by their average lifespan and divide that figure by 365, you will end up with about a dozen years. In other words, the number of extra years they live is roughly equivalent to the number of days they spend in Sabbath keeping. It may be coincidence, but the Bible hints at a cause-and-effect relationship between keeping



the Sabbath and living a long life. Living 24/7 is life draining; living 24/6 is life giving.

*Teach us to number our days.* As Naomi's story illustrates, life is unpredictable. We should always be at peace with God. The cares of the world want to drag us away from that peace. Observing a Sabbath ensures that at the very worst, we are never more than six days away from a holy perspective. Sabbath keeping gives us the time to set priorities—for a day, for a week, and for generations.



In *24/6*, Dr. Matthew Sleeth shares how his family was dramatically transformed when it began adopting Sabbath practices, and he'll help you better understand how your own life can be radically transformed—physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually—by adopting a 24/6 lifestyle.

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