

Wrestling and Wonder

A One Week Online Devotional by Dayna Schoonmaker

This one week Bible study intends to help you wrestle with the complexities of faith in an unseen God during an unprecedented season of life. As you move through the devotionals below, you are invited to participate in practices designed to help you engage more deeply with each day's message. Following these practices you can read through brief passages of scripture and reflect on the accompanying questions which will help you process the daily theme as you continue to develop your life in Christ.

Devotionals

Day 1:: Breathing Underwater - Life with God is not a promise that we will never face hardships, trials, or doubts, but rather a promise that we will know where to focus our mind's attention and our heart's affection regardless of those troubles. When we feel uncertain or disoriented, it is important to know whose we are even if we do not have a clear sense of where we are going.

As you begin your devotional time today, practice some simple breathing exercises. Start by breathing in slowly to a count of four and then breathing out slowly to a count of four. Repeat 3-4 times. Next, breathe in to a count of four, hold your breath for a count of seven, and breathe out to a count of eight. Repeat 3-4 times. Learning restorative breathing practices will help you settle and refocus in situations when you feel anxious.

Scripture Reading:

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. Isaiah 43:1-2

Questions

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were drowning? What does it feel like to be that overwhelmed? Try to remember what helped you move through your flailing to regain a sense of peace.
2. What types of fire are you experiencing in life right now? Are you allowing God to walk you through them or are you forging ahead on your own?
3. God says you need not fear the flood for you are called by name and you belong to God. Because you are God's, you shall pass through the waters and not be overwhelmed, you will walk through the fire and not be burned. Try to absorb that promise. What does it feel like to believe God will see you through even the most difficult trials and fears?

Day 2:: Wrestling with God - You cannot win a fight you don't enter. We all have things that trigger us, drawing out feelings from deep within us. Jacob spent his whole life wrestling with those types of feelings as he tried to attain the things he thought he deserved and become the person he thought he was supposed to be. Jacob also wrestles with everyone from his brother in the womb, to God himself, always seeking to gain a blessing. And as a result... Jacob is wounded, but Jacob is also blessed. It seems counter-intuitive and sometimes unfair that Jacob receives these blessings, but God rewards the tenacity in Jacob and helps him live into his godly potential.

Give yourself permission for physical release today. Pent up anger and frustration often lead to unhealthy behavior, but you can discharge some of that energy in healthy ways leading instead to a blessing - for you and for those around you. Grab a stress ball or small sports ball and give it a good repetitive squeeze while naming things that are bothering you. Or head out to the yard and pick up sticks or pull weeds. If you need to, snap a few branches in half or give a loud grunt as you fight a tough weed. It's ok to embody difficult feelings in intentional and controlled ways.

Scripture Reading:

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Genesis 32:22-26

Questions

1. Night time is frequently the time when unchecked anxieties peak. How do you deal with night time wrestling? Are there ways you could include God in your wrestling?
2. Often we try to suppress difficult feelings. There are various reasons for this: we don't have time to deal with them, we are afraid of what they mean, we are in denial about what we are really feeling, etc. Are there any feelings you need to make the space and time to feel and to deal with?
3. God blesses us when we wrestle. Can you name a time when you've really wrestled with something and walked away with a blessing? Perhaps you can only remember the wound. If so, can you now, from a distance, see beyond the wound to where there might also have been a blessing?

Day 3:: Unmasking Imperfection - Somewhere along the way, Christians perpetuated the idea that we must all look perfect, act perfect, and be perfect in order to prove our holiness. While we are en route to perfection, the truth is we are far from perfect. As Christians, we should own the fact that we are imperfect beings in need of a Savior. Only when we own our shortcomings can we begin the process of being recreated in the image of Christ.

Part of putting up a facade of perfection means we aren't letting people see us for who we truly are. Spend a few minutes in front of a mirror and really look at yourself. This might be uncomfortable. We use mirrors frequently, but we don't always take the time to really look at ourselves in them. Ask God to reveal God's truth to you as you look at yourself face-to-face. You may be surprised to see that some things you perceive as faults are actually beautiful gifts you have been hiding from the world. You may also realize that some of the things you are hiding need to be brought into the light so they can be addressed directly in order for you to experience healing.

Scripture Reading:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:43-48

Questions

1. When tensions run high, people often begin to self-protect and look out primarily for their own interests. It is in tough circumstances that we see ourselves as we truly are. As Christians, we are instructed to look beyond ourselves and our communities to show love to our enemies. What 'enemies' are you struggling to love today?
2. Sometimes the enemy isn't the 'other,' it's ourselves. What aspects of yourself are you struggling to love right now? How can you extend love toward those parts of yourself today?
3. Spend some time in prayer asking God to reveal specific aspects of your life that are in need of work. Perfection is a process. It may be helpful to be aware that sometimes the things we automatically think of aren't actually the places where God wants to start. Listen intently as you pray. Extend copious amounts of grace to yourself as you begin to submit these areas to God's perfecting hand.

Day 4:: Seeing Clearly - There is an assurance we find in realizing that everything will make sense eventually. A jigsaw puzzle promises that if you take the time to carefully fit each piece together, eventually you will see the whole picture. In the meantime, you are left to work out tiny details with minimal clues as to why any given piece fits into any another. Our lives work similarly. We may be working on an outside edge or a subsection around the middle, but the whole story of our life won't be fully evident until our life is over. Then, the entirety of the picture will be apparent. So press on in your faith, your discipleship, your service, and your love. Each and every piece is meaningful to the whole - even if you can't quite see how.

If you have a puzzle in the closet, perhaps today is a good day to pull it out and start working on it. Try to assemble it by putting the box away after you dump out the pieces so you cannot see the finished image while you are working on the puzzle. If you experience frustration or discouragement while working the puzzle, stop and assess why you feel this way rather than just resorting to looking at the box. If you are able to get lost in the process of putting the puzzle together, let yourself enjoy the journey instead of being solely focused on the finished product.

Scripture Reading:

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 1 Corinthians 13:12

Questions

1. Knowing yourself, seeing yourself as God sees you, will not be fully possible until you are made whole in the kingdom of God. Even though you are unable to see the final reality now, how can you learn to see yourself from God's perspective as you grow in your discipleship?
2. In what ways do you experience relief in not having to understand the whole picture of your life as you move through it?
3. Take some time to express gratitude to God for holding all the pieces of your life so that you don't have to. Work on establishing trust in God's plan and purpose for your life so that you don't have to try to manufacture a way forward when you can't see what's around the bend.

Day 5:: Observe the Wonder All Around - Fear, anxiety, doubt, trouble - they are never far away and are easy to find if you go looking for them. But similarly, wonder, beauty, grace, and love are never far away either. As Christians, we can choose to look for wonder and beauty instead of fear or trouble. We can do so because we trust that God has all things well in hand even when we do not. We can choose to look out at the budding trees and emerging wildlife with a sense of wonder. What will you choose to see?

Spend some time breathing in the fresh air today. Go for a walk, even if it's just around your house. Open a window or sit on the porch. Find a way to allow nature in, even as we are restricted in our movements. If you are unable to go outside, just looking out of a window can bring great joy. If you are comfortable singing aloud, offer a song into the world today.

Scripture Reading:

You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas, who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength, who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations. The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders; where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy. Psalm 65:5-8

Questions

1. Did you find it easy or difficult to choose to look for beauty today? Why do you think you had that initial reaction?
2. Once you stopped for a moment and shifted your perspective to seek wonder and beauty, what did you find? What did that experience feel like?
3. Are you leaving this study in a place of wrestling or a place of wonder? Either place, or any place in between, is fine. Just be sure to acknowledge where you are currently, so you can set your sights on where you want to be ultimately.

For those interested in further reading, check out
Hinds' Feet on High Places by Hannah Hurnard.