

week one COUNTING

DOWN

DO THIS SECTION OF THE DEVOTIONAL BEFORE GOING ON THE TRIP.

This journal was written particularly for students going on a mission trip.

I don't know why you signed up or where you're going, but I do know that going on a mission trip changed my life and I'm praying that your trip changes your life as well.

God wants to show you who to minister to and how he wants you to minister to them. He does that in a lot of different ways – through Scripture, circumstances, and the wise counsel of others, just to name a few. When the Lord guides us, we may not hear an actual voice, but he is speaking nonetheless. Your mission trip is a great place to practice hearing his voice.

As you go through this journal, you'll read stories of people who heard God's voice and what happened as a result. I know most of the people in the stories personally; they really had these experiences. And, I hope reading about them will prepare you for your own stories.

So how do you hear God's voice? Where do you start? The starting point is a personal relationship with Jesus. The cool thing about being a Christian is that, unlike most other religions, it's not about a bunch of rules. It's about just hanging out with Jesus. He isn't physically on earth anymore so he can't play frisbee or drink coffee, but he can still have a friendship with you.

But, if you're like me, lots of times it doesn't feel like a friendship. It feels like you're talking to the air.

For a long time I always knew God was supposed to be my best friend – but secretly I liked my earthly friends better. Over the years, God has become my best friend, and it isn't because he's supposed to be, it's because I can be honest with him and because we talk. It's a process and you have to work at it, just like anything else. You can fight and yell (God can handle it) and cry and laugh and smile. Everything. If you really and truly want to get closer to Jesus, it's going to look like any other relationship you have – up and down and all around. And to do that, you've got to let him talk back to you.

Is our “personal” relationship with Jesus really personal?

Real Life Story

In the winter of 2002 my coworker, Deryck Livingston, and I traveled to Bethel College in Indiana. My friend, Professor Terry Linhart, had asked us to be guest speakers, teaching his class about discipleship. We prepared a lesson that was as interactive as we could make it. We felt the Lord asking us to demonstrate that he is alive and that he desires to communicate with us in a personal way. Deryck asked the class, “Who here has never really heard the Lord in a clear way?”

A number of hands went up.

“Would any of you volunteer to come up here so that we can pray and ask God to speak to you?”

One young man named Ernest came forward to pray with Deryck. They sat there at the front of the class while everyone else either prayed or looked on. Although we believed that the Lord had directed us to go through this exercise, we did so with some trepidation. Would anything happen? The whole exercise required faith. We believed that God wants to speak to his children, but now we were putting our faith on the line. Ernest settled into the chair, and Deryck laid a hand on his shoulder and prayed.

It was a simple, sincere prayer. “Lord, here we are before you. I am sitting here with Ernest who has come forward to hear your voice, to know what you have to say to him. Would you reveal yourself to him as he seeks you now with all his heart?”

We waited in silence. We were expectant and curious, but still a little uncertain. How often do we just stop and wait expectantly on the Lord? After a while Deryck quietly asked, “Ernest, have you heard anything? Has God laid anything on your heart?” Ernest nodded and said softly, “He wants me to know how much he loves me.” Deryck paused and then asked, “Can you receive that?” Again Ernest nodded and quietly said with some effort, “I’ve been trying so hard to do the right thing: to do well in school, make good choices, to please him.” He paused, then said with conviction and wonder, “But he just says he wants me to know he loves me, really loves me, and that all this other stuff doesn’t matter that much.”

Later, Deryck reflected how everything shifted at that moment. It had been an exercise, a demonstration that God will speak to us if we slow down enough to listen and allow him to speak to us.

The Lord loves Ernest so much, and he wanted him to know it. In that classroom, before he was done, Ernest not only heard God speak, but in his mind also saw a beautiful picture of himself reflecting God’s golden light. The change that came over Ernest was visible in his countenance. He was so excited; he finally knew God’s love and grace, and was relieved of a burden of performance. What a difference it made for him to know God’s love regardless of his efforts! He told us he could work for the joy of it now; that he wanted to make God smile. “I need to spend more time like this just being with God. It was so cool just hanging out without trying to think of what to pray about. I realize now that even in prayer I was getting wrapped up in my own concerns. Hey, maybe God doesn’t take life so seriously. He might just want me to enjoy life with him.” There were nods and comments of agreement from classmates as Ernest marveled at his experience. So it is with our relationship to God. We grow in our intimacy as we share our heart with him and as he shares more of his heart with us. The infatuation phase lasts for a season. To grow beyond that phase, we must pursue God and talk with him, seeking to truly know him.

Jesus wants a personal relationship

Jesus wants us not to just know about him, but to actually have a deep, personal relationship with him – to know him and to be known by him. John 17: 3 says, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” If you look at the Greek origin of the word translated “knowing,” it refers to the most intimate of relationships. He wants our relationship with him to be a deep and intimate.

Evangelical Christians claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Yet how many actually do have a relationship with him that is personal? Relationships involve give and take, mutual interaction and dialogue. Marriages that lack this grow stale. If I relate to my wife by giving her a daily list of things to do or by telling her about my thoughts and never ask her what her thoughts or feelings are, then our relationship becomes impersonal. I will know little about her. She will not know that I care about her. To have a personal relationship with my wife, I must listen to her as well as speak.

Our relationship with God should work the same way. Jeremiah 33:3 says, “Call to me and I will answer you...” (emphasis added). God wants us to give him our praises, our struggles, and our questions. And in return he also wants to give to us counsel, encouragement, and consolation. This interaction becomes the fabric of our relationship. The more frequent and honest our give-and-take with Jesus, the more personal it becomes.

This is understandably uncomfortable. God may be personal, but he is also different from us in some critical ways. He is invisible. He is transcendent; that is, he is far above our understanding. He is all-powerful. He is completely holy.

So, while we may look for give and take in our relationship with Jesus, oftentimes the main thing we hear is silence. It is no wonder Christians struggle to make their relationship with him a truly personal one. Silence in conversation usually feels awkward.

While it’s true that God tells us over and over in his word to seek him and to love him, we must suspend our expectations of how he will respond to us. As we seek to know God personally, we must not lose sight of his transcendence.

Apply it /

Scripture meditation

Spend a minute or more just thinking about the following passages: “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” (John 10:3-4)

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...” (John 10:14)

Pray: “Lord, show me what you want me to learn from this passage.” Wait in silence as the Holy Spirit reveals truth to you. /

- *day one* -

Questions to ask the Lord

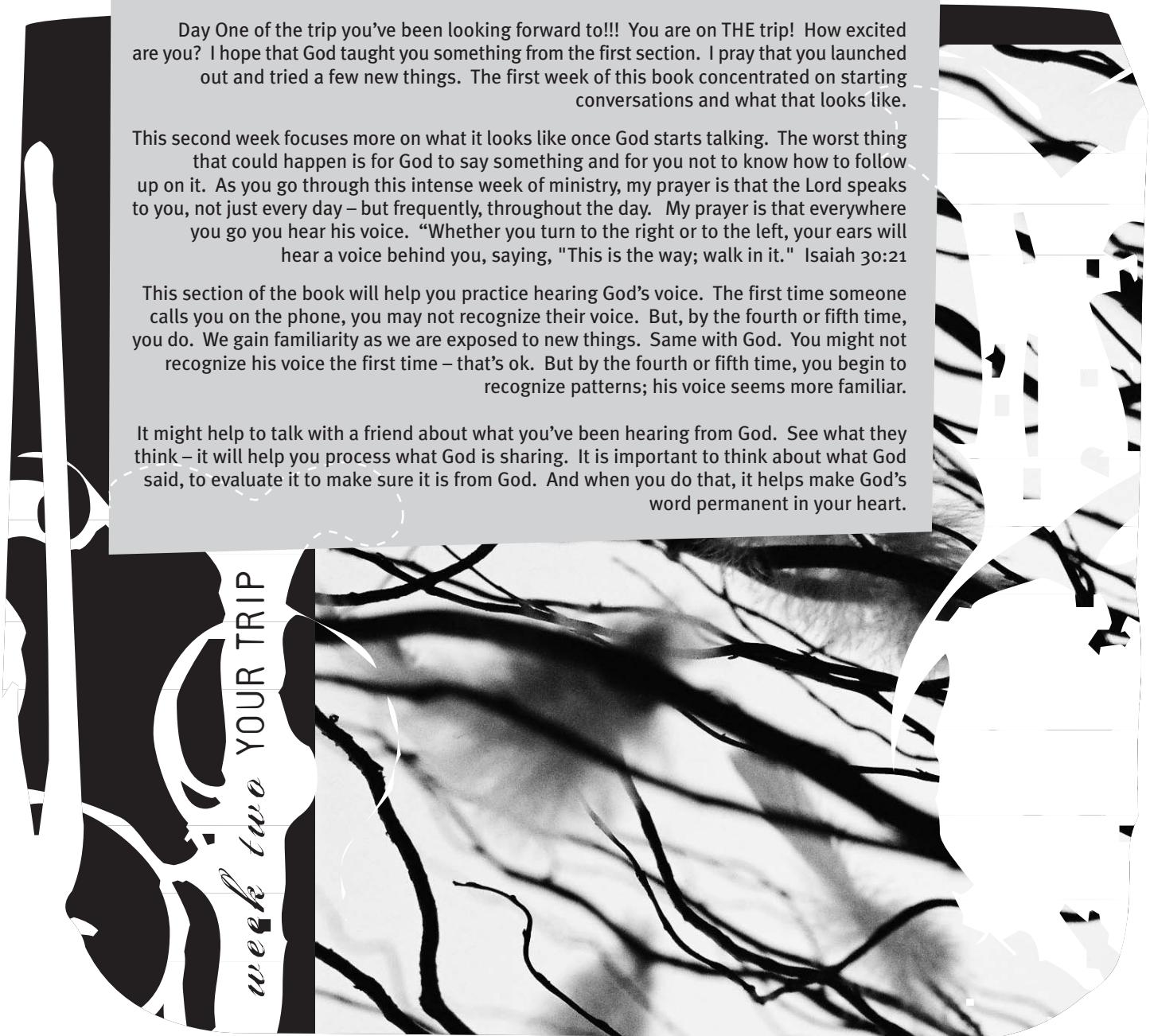
How do I hear your voice?

Do I possess a hunger for a closer walk with you? What would an increased hunger for a closer walk with you look like?

Imagine going out for a cup of coffee with God. If he were one of your best friends, what would you want to tell him about?

Tell Jesus those things. If you would ask your friend questions, you can ask Jesus!

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...” (Psalm 95:7-8)



Day One of the trip you've been looking forward to!!! You are on THE trip! How excited are you? I hope that God taught you something from the first section. I pray that you launched out and tried a few new things. The first week of this book concentrated on starting conversations and what that looks like.

This second week focuses more on what it looks like once God starts talking. The worst thing that could happen is for God to say something and for you not to know how to follow up on it. As you go through this intense week of ministry, my prayer is that the Lord speaks to you, not just every day – but frequently, throughout the day. My prayer is that everywhere you go you hear his voice. “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” Isaiah 30:21

This section of the book will help you practice hearing God’s voice. The first time someone calls you on the phone, you may not recognize their voice. But, by the fourth or fifth time, you do. We gain familiarity as we are exposed to new things. Same with God. You might not recognize his voice the first time – that’s ok. But by the fourth or fifth time, you begin to recognize patterns; his voice seems more familiar.

It might help to talk with a friend about what you’ve been hearing from God. See what they think – it will help you process what God is sharing. It is important to think about what God said, to evaluate it to make sure it is from God. And when you do that, it helps make God’s word permanent in your heart.

week two YOUR TRIP

God speaks through the Bible

Real Life Story

I have personally experienced God's direction through the Scriptures and have heard many accounts of people who sought God's direction in their lives and received it directly from the Bible.

I remember when my grandfather died. I loved my grandfather. He loved me and spent time with me. Golf was a passion of his. We spent many mornings together on the public course in Fernandina Beach, Florida. Afterwards we'd talk over a hamburger and coke. He loved to tell jokes and would always repeat the punch line and laugh.

When Granddad died, I struggled to know that God understood the grief I felt. I hadn't had to deal with death on this level before. So when God shared with me 2 Corinthians 5:1-4, it blew me away. In this passage, Paul compares our mortal body to a tent. "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven...For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened..."

Those were exactly the words I needed to hear. They were God's personal words of comfort to his hurting child. His words showed me that he empathized with my grief and held out the hope of life beyond this earth for my grandfather. All of a sudden, my relationship with God was very personal. His words out of Scripture were a great comfort to me. It felt as though he had written them just for me. I knew that he hadn't left me to struggle through this alone – he cared. I felt a wonderful consolation in my loss, and I experienced a revelation of God's personal love as words on paper leapt off the page and spoke to me.

The Bible is the starting place in our pursuit of a personal relationship with God because it is his revelation of himself to mankind. He revealed himself to us in his inspired, infallible Scriptures because he loves us. It is not only the story of his relationship with people, but also one of the main tools that he uses to communicate with us. God instructs us and guides us using the Bible. Because God uses the Scriptures to speak to us, we look to them for his direction. In our society we are blessed with the opportunity to own multiple copies of the Bible and to be educated in how to study it.

If you're like me, you began communicating with God relying primarily on the Bible. You learned to respect it. Since it is unchanging, you can always turn to it and find truth – there are God's words in black and white. The Bible is God's tool for communicating with us. We must understand the value of Scripture; we see in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training."

- day eight -

Don't limit God!

But, having said this, we need to recognize that anything taken too far can get in the way of the truth. If you never exit your prayer closet, you may lose touch with the world. Similarly, some of us have substituted a “relationship” with a book for a relationship with God. God can talk to us any way he wants. After all, he’s God! He chose many different ways to speak to people in Scripture, and he may choose different ways with us as well. He does not tell us in Scripture that he will only speak to us through the Bible.

As we saw in Scripture on Day Four of this devotional, the Bible gives us example after example of a God who speaks not only through Scripture, but also through circumstances, through other people, through dreams, impressions, and numerous other means. He used a rooster to convict Peter of his faithlessness. He has probably spoken to you through your friends or family members. He regularly uses pastoral sermons to challenge people to godly living.

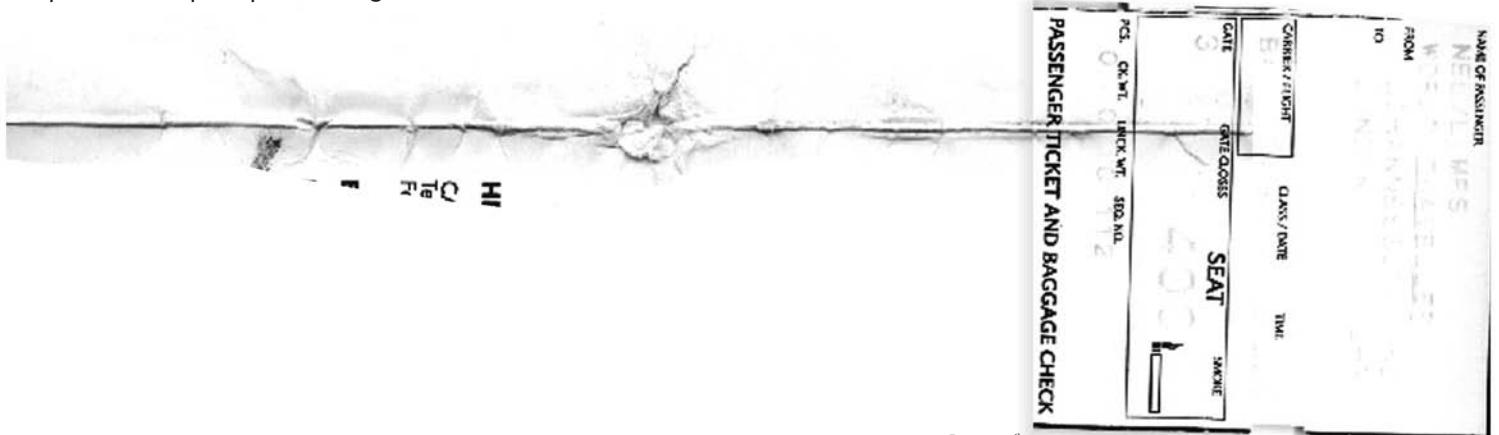
He doesn’t want us to limit the ways in which we look for him to speak. Some people take the path of least resistance, figuring that God speaks primarily through circumstances. Others rely too heavily on their feelings. Still others are flaky in pursuing every impression that they interpret as coming from God, even when the impressions may contradict Scripture.

God created you. He wants to have a personal relationship with you more than you want to connect with him. Remind yourself, as we Christians often tell nonbelievers, “He loves you!” He didn’t just give you a general revelation; he wants you to know him personally as an individual. He knows your worries. He has numbered the hairs on your head and cares for you more than many sparrows. He wants an intimate relationship with you.

The Bible is the account of a God who speaks directly and relationally, not in code. Because he is interested in relationship and good communication, we can expect him to be clear. When we see examples of him speaking using Old Testament Scripture in the New Testament, it is often to confirm what he has said in other ways. As Hebrews 1:1 says, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways...” There are many examples of this in Acts, the last of which is in Acts 28:25-29, where Paul cites Isaiah to show that God has sent salvation to the Gentiles.

But if you lack experience in hearing God’s voice, you can’t be blamed for asking whether or not conversation with God is even possible. Restricting yourself to the Bible makes it all so much more clear cut. You may find yourself asking honest questions like: Is it supposed to be a kind of monologue, a one-way chattering to the air, or a dialogue? And if it's meant to be a dialogue, then am I meant to hear God speak only through the Bible like some kind of codebook?

If we truly believe that the Bible is inspired, then we must not try to torture meaning from it to fit our experience. Rather, we should follow the patterns and principles that it gives us.



Apply it

Scripture meditation

Spend a minute or more just thinking about the following passage: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Pray: “Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us the gift of Scripture. Thank you for speaking it into existence as you communicated to men and they obediently wrote what they perceived you to say down on parchment. Thank you for the many ways in which it can be used.

Is there a particular truth you'd like to show me from this verse?”

Wait in silence as the Holy Spirit reveals truth to you.

Questions to ask the Lord

Lord, have I failed to keep an open mind about the ways in which you may choose to speak to me? When?

How have you chosen to speak to me in the past?

BACK HOME

week three

By now you've had 14 days of practicing to hear God's voice. I pray that you know what it sounds like. And while you've had the experience, understand that it is perfectly normal to have thoughts enter your head like: "That's not God, those were just my own random thoughts." Or, "Please don't make me do that."

Those are just some of the things that sometimes go through my head when I listen to God. Our enemy, Satan, wants to stop you in any way he can. He's a liar, the Bible calls him "the father of lies" (John 8:44). In the days to come, we'll cover some of the lies and schemes you will encounter and need to pray through.

One other thing – when I began understanding what listening to God looks like, I wanted my friends to know about it. The last day is about how to share what you've experienced with your friends. God wants to guide us as we go through life. It's a secret worth sharing. He'll show you how.

Overcoming obstacles: worries

Real Life Story

Christy McGraw almost didn't go on her 2003 missions trip to England. With a week to go before leaving, she wrote the leader to say she was backing out. The leader asked her if God had told her not to go. She said, "My grandmother needs me and I'm worried about getting the money in."

The leader said, "Pray about it over the weekend."
She did and came back saying, "OK, I guess I'm supposed to go."

Amazingly, the rest of the money she needed came in during the next week. After the trip, she wrote the following: "God's love is so important to our life but sometimes we don't think we deserve it. God sent me to England to heal my broken heart and to help me realize I am worthy of his GREAT Love. I have always felt a sense of worthlessness in my life. I never felt I was worthy of anything from friends to family and even God's love. But all that changed August 2nd. We as a team were having a time of prayer and of worship and Mary Lou (a team leader) was going to pray for boldness for each of us. When she got to me and touched me, I just started to sob. God had let Mary Lou know some things about me. I had let Satan enter my mind and tell me how worthless I was and how I didn't deserve love. This had been happening a long time. We prayed against this feeling of worthlessness and as we prayed I felt something released from around my heart. I felt free from this burden of worthlessness; Satan no longer had a hold of my mind. God loves me so very much - more than I could ever imagine! God took all those lies and threw them away and in one touch healed my heart and made it whole! After this powerful experience with God, I learned even more about just how loving our Father is and how extraordinary Christ is. It took me leaving everything I held near to my heart, my family, friends, and church for God to really show me how magnificent he really is. I praise him for the opportunity to go on this trip and I praise him for changing my life!"

Why we worry

Even if over the last several weeks of going through this devotional, you've discovered that God wants to communicate with you personally and have begun to hear his voice, the devil is not sweating too much. He knows how to use our short attention spans and tendency to worry, to rob us of the word of the Lord. To make conversation with God a lifestyle, we have to do battle with our enemy and with our own nature. Perhaps you're one who struggles with a "Martha" spirit, a frequent ringing of your hands in worry. You're conscientious – concerned about getting stuff done. As a consequence, as the clock ticks by, you fret. Perhaps you care so deeply that things be done well that sometimes your concern becomes a worry and crowds out your compassion for people. How do you find balance?

If we are to grow in our ability to focus our attention on God as we communicate with him, we have to address the issue of worry. We worry because we doubt that something we want to happen, something that we may feel responsible to help make happen, is actually ever going to come to pass. We may find ourselves hearing God say something one moment, only to find worries about a relational conflict or an upcoming test (or something as out of our control as the prospects for world peace) filling our minds and crowding out what God has said to us. Worries introduce the lie that God either doesn't care or that he lacks power. They are rooted in the conclusion that we are not God's children, but are in fact more like orphans with no one to look out for us. Worries are, by definition, thoughts. As such, they fill the mind, taking up space, preventing at least for a time, the possibility of kingdom-thinking. It's impossible to simultaneously entertain a worry and to trust God. James 1:8 calls such a person who does this "double-minded." James observes that because they lack conviction, they are unstable. God wants to provide for our needs, but to receive his provision we have to trust him. Worrying deprives us of that ability to trust. It calls our adoption into question. Worrying takes the responsibility for providing for our needs out of our heavenly Father's hands, where they belong, and places them in ours. When we worry, we assume ownership of the problem, figuring that if it's going to be resolved, it's up to us.

There's a difference between worries and concerns. A concern stems from taking responsibility for the completion of a task. It's normal when one has a responsibility to think about the way in which it will be accomplished. Just because details pop into your mind doesn't mean they are from the devil. But when those concerns are compulsively and repetitively recycled through one's brain, they turn into worries – thoughts which crowd out the word of the Lord through the constant murmur of unfulfilled details. It isn't enough to decide to stop worrying. That only addresses the symptom of the real root – the thought, "I am an orphan. I am responsible for my own provision" – which in turn results in an inability to trust God. Until that lie has been addressed and exchanged for the truth: "God loves me and has promised to care for me," worry is going to be our inevitable companion, filling our minds when it is most crucial that they be fixed on the Lord.



Apply it

Meditate on what the Bible says about worry:

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear...who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” (Luke 12:22, 25).

“Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34).

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything...present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

Scripture meditation

Spend a minute or more just thinking about the following passage: “The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature...Therefore consider carefully how you listen” (Luke 8:14, 18 [emphasis added]).

Pray: Lord, help me to know that I don’t need to worry. Break down barriers in my life so that I can trust you. Reveal to me those things I fear that cause me to worry. Have I let anxiety come between you and me? What do you want to say to me about worry?”

Wait in silence as the Holy Spirit reveals truth to you.

Questions to ask the Lord

Ask the Lord the questions below. Write down your impression of what he may be saying in the space allotted.

What areas of my life am I most worried about? Why?

Do I trust you with all these areas? Which ones do I not trust you in?