

11 Spiritual Practices

Exercises For Moving Away From Disappointment, Loss and Pain and Heading Towards God



Spiritual Practices

The following collection of spiritual exercises, disciplines and practices are inspired by and derived from our upcoming book, “**How to Survive and Thrive in the Face of Disappointment, Loss and Pain**”, which will be published soon and made **available free for subscribed readers**. Each spiritual discipline in this collection is designed to help you move from suffering to joy. It’s important to remember that spiritual practices are highly personal, and you may not connect with or feel inspired by each method. There certainly is no such thing as an “ultimate spiritual discipline” that works for everyone and fits every situation! Spiritual exercises are simply pathways to the source of healing, which is God. Spiritual practices are not the fix - they just help us orient ourselves to the fix, which is Jesus. It’s also important to note that perfecting spiritual practices is also not a primary goal. The goal in studying these practices is not to pray better, study Scripture better, or any other goal of that nature. Rather, the primary goal is to access God - God can use whatever He likes to achieve that destination! So don’t judge or be hard on yourself if a spiritual exercise doesn’t work for you - the important thing is to keep exploring your relationship with God and better understanding the uniqueness and specialness of your own relationship with Jesus.

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1. Matthew 11:28-30 Worksheet

In response to Jesus' calling from Matthew 11:28-30, in your own words, write an interpretation of this passage, focusing on Jesus' invitation to care for your burdens. Use this as an opportunity to interpret what Jesus is saying to you and what He is speaking to you about your pain. Use the space below each bolded section to respond. For example, you under "Come to Me," you could write, "Jesus is calling me to Him. He is requesting my presence. He is interested and cares for me."

Write an interpretive response to each line from Matt. 11:28-30

Come to Me

All You Who are Weary and Burdened

And I will Give You Rest.

Take My Yoke Upon You

And Learn from Me,

For I am Gentle and Humble in Heart,

And You Will Find Rest for Your Souls.

For My Yoke is Easy and My Burden is Light.

2. Open Hands

The purpose of this exercise is to better understand the process of giving over your disappointment, pain and heartache to God.

Begin by focusing on the major issue in your life that is causing you heartache and grief. As you think about the stressor, use your hands to symbolize the pain and while doing so, allow your hands to ball up into fists. With clenched hands, focus your hurt into your hands and welcome God into your mind. Then, slowly release your pain to God and gradually unclench your hands until you have two open palms. This symbolic act is a prayer that helps release your hurt to God. End the exercise with open-palmed hands, which symbolize your willingness to trust God with your problems. Repeat this exercise as many times as needed to help align your heart and mind to God.

3. Attend to your Experience

Part A

This exercise is designed to help you uncover the broken places in your life that need God's healing. You'll need a journal or something to record your thoughts during this exercise.

Begin by becoming aware of the presence of God, and then envision walking with God through your past hurt, loss, suffering. As you focus, remain in that past experience with God, and visualize walking hand and hand with Him through the pain. Pay attention to all the feelings that surface and write them down as they rise. After recording your feelings, immediately return to the exercise as soon as you are finished writing each emotion. As you do this exercise, focus more on the feelings that arise than the actual pain. Some feelings you might encounter include shame, embarrassment, anger, disappointment, impatience and so forth. All of these feelings are indicators of hurts that need to be explored with God.

Please note that the point of this exercise is not to delve into the most traumatic or painful experiences. Deeply exploring those issues are something that should be done with the guidance of a qualified counselor or therapist. Don't push yourself too deeply - this exercise is all about taking an assessment of yourself and where your pains lie. If something arises that seems particularly painful, simply say to God, "Lord, this is too painful for me to walk through - I need your help Jesus," and move forward. Again, the point of this exercise is to figure out where the hurts are, and to ask for God's guidance in moving through your history of suffering and disappointments.

Part B

After completing Part A, revisit what you wrote and spend sometime thinking about why the feelings arose that you recorded. As you explore why the feelings might be present, look for indicators of what issues led these emotions to rest inside you. It is important to note that these feelings are always present in us, but are playing like background music, often so softly that we don't notice them. The point of this exercise is to notice them, because they can clue you into what you are really feeling. As you explore your feelings from Part A of this exercise, invite God into the process. Ask Him what you should do about the feelings that surfaced. Ask Him what He wants for you.

4. Timeline

Make a timeline of your life that focuses on your disappointments, suffering and losses. Take note of each point on the timeline and consider how you responded to each hurt. Examples of responses might be withdraw, denial, shame, blame, depression, rage, etc. Is there a pattern of response that occurs when you experience hurts? Do you respond the same way when you feel pain? Next, consider if there is there is an emotional support you wish you would have received during those times, such as compassion, understanding, sympathy, love, or support? Were there instances where these virtues were offered to you, but you simply weren't able to receive them?

Bring this all before Jesus and talk to Him about what thoughts and feelings emerge.

Studying God's Word

The wonderful thing about Scripture is that it is a timeless record of what God has done through His people in the past, and He continues to speak to us through His actions and words in the Bible. Learning about God through Scripture enables us to have a clearer and sturdier understanding of who God is and how He works. There are many methods for studying Scripture, and the methods I'll be describing here represent only a small fraction of Biblical study methods. However, the most important thing to keep in mind is that the Bible is unlike any other book, because it is intended to be read with an acute awareness of the presence of God. I encourage you to begin each Scripture study session with with a prayer acknowledging God's presence with you as you study. That prayer might look something like, "*Father, I know that you are here with me. Holy Spirit, help me to understand what You've spoken in the past, and what You're speaking to me today.*"

IDEAS FOR STUDYING GOD’S WORD:

5. Micro to Macro Biblical Interpretation

We often tend to look at Scripture through the lens of specific passages and verses. This exercise is designed to get you to look at the big picture of what God has done and is doing.

1. Begin by taking any Bible verse that you want to focus on and understand better in your life. Read through the verse carefully several times, paying close attention to the words and what they are truly speaking to you from that verse alone.
2. After reading your verse closely, read the entire chapter that it is contained within, focusing in on the sections leading up to, and directly after your verse. Was there something about your verse that became clearer, or changed in meaning, because of the context of the whole chapter?
3. Backing up even further in your study, read the entire book your verse is contained within. If it’s a particularly large book, like Psalms, you may want to consult a study Bible or other resource and determine if there are widely agreed upon sections within the book that are grouped together. For example, if you are studying a verse in Psalm 22, which was written by David, you may wish to read all of David’s psalms.
4. Finally, what does the book your verse is contained within say about God and God’s purposes within the entire context of the Bible? Is there something unique about that book that provides insight not found elsewhere in the Bible? A good question when assessing the theological value of a book is to ask, “What would we NOT understand about God if it weren’t for this book’s insight?” Again, study Bibles and Bible commentaries can be helpful for finding this information.

The overall point of this exercise is to gain a fuller understanding of a particular verse. No verse in the Bible is a completely stand alone piece of information, and we shouldn’t view them as such. Again, this is just one way to study Scripture in a way that moves us beyond seeing inspirational passages as isolated ideas, and instead allows us to see the full context of Scripture and God’s message for us.

6. Study a Gospel

We often look at Scripture with an emphasis on what God is saying to us about our faith. In this exercise, your mission is to choose a Gospel and read through it with the specific mission to see how Jesus lived His life, how He encountered and responded to trials, and how He depended on His Father. In particular, the purpose of this exercise is to help you understand how Jesus lived out His faith. Take note of themes you might find in the Gospel, and anything that might be surprising to you. As you study, open

your mind and heart and really allow the Gospel to tell you the story of Jesus, even if you've read or heard about it your whole life. Make sure to look for details you may have never noticed before. You'll be surprised how much comes to you each time you practice this exercise!

7. Memorization/Meditation

Memorization of Scripture and meditating on its words can be very helpful in the pursuit of focusing on God. However, the goal is not to simply memorize as many verses as possible. No -in fact it's entirely possible for a person to memorize the entire Bible and have no relationship with God whatsoever! Rather, the goal in this exercise is utilize Scripture as a means to connect to God, soothe a grieving heart, and clear a cluttered mind. In this way, Scripture becomes written on our hearts and minds (Deut. 11:18)

Here are a few examples of the kind of Scripture you might choose to focus on:

Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."

Psalm 16:8 "I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken."

Psalm 55:22 "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken."

Memorization doesn't necessarily have to be conducted only with Scripture! You can also take a favorite prayer, quote or a part of a worship song and memorize it and allow it to fill your mind. Write portions of your passage or verse on a notecard, or in your phone, and use a reminder to have it pop up throughout the day. Also, you can use the Scripture, quote, or song as a prayer, or find way to incorporate the words into your own spiritual practices.

Prayer

There are many ways to pray to God. The style of prayer that usually comes to our minds first is "conversational prayer," which is simply talking to God. Below are a few different prayer practices that will help you connect to God with methods that you may have never tried before.

8. Breath Prayer

A breath prayer is a simple statement that you can use throughout the day to help you deal with your pain, troubles, and grief. Breath prayer allows you to focus on the prayer and God, and it's incredibly simple. To begin, first breathe in air while saying a name or title for God (such as Jesus, Father, Spirit, Creator, Healer, Redeemer, etc). Then, slowly exhale out your concern or desire (such as , "Help me", "Heal me", "Take away my pain"). For example, you might slowly breathe in the name "Jesus," while thinking about Him and what He has to offer you. Then, you slowly exhale while saying, "Heal me," and truly focus on releasing your concern into the loving arms of Jesus. Repeat this prayer as many times as needed.

9. Centering Prayer

This is a prayer practice where you simply focus on making yourself present with God. Begin by finding a comfortable place and focusing on your awareness of God's presence with you. Simply be with God and rest in His love for you. Focus on the reality that His love is overwhelming you, and try to allow yourself to experience it. As you do, center yourself into this truth and awareness. If your thoughts should wander, simply relax your mind and try to center yourself back to the presence of God. If you happen to fall asleep, don't beat yourself up - maybe sleep is what your weary soul needs. Just like a parent who loves having their child rest soundly in their arms, rest soundly in the Lord's.

10. Prayer Throughout the Day

Being in connection with God throughout the day is a wonderful privilege Christians can participate in, but only if they are cognizant of God's presence. One way to become aware of God is to pray throughout the day. Set an alarm or reminder on your phone to come up every waking hour (or at least with a regular frequency) to remind you to stop and pray for a moment. Think about what you would like to bring before God, and let that be the focus in your prayers. You might focus on overcoming the pain you are facing, or you might simply pray to understand more about God's love for you. Or you can focus on anything of importance to you - the main thing in this exercise is the discipline required to complete it. When that alarm or notification sounds, stop everything and focus on an awareness of God's presence and speak with Him about what's on your heart. Try this for a day (or if you really want a spiritual challenge, maybe even a week) and see what happens when you attend to God in this organized way.

11. Praying with a Friend

Find a trustworthy friend who is committed in their relationship with God, and inquire if they would like to become a prayer partner with you. Meet regularly, either in person, video chat, or phone. Make sure to schedule the times, and from the beginning emphasize the importance of maintaining the scheduled meetings. Adhering to the schedule is part of the discipline - remember, God wants us to turn to Him during chaos and peace! Choose a meeting frequency that works for each party and commit to each other to pray together then, as well as when you are apart from one another. This is a great way to build a spiritual friendship and gain insight into how God works in human relationships.