

## Weekly Devotional : Week 5

March 5-11, 2023

### How to use this devotional


For many of us, encountering God's presence and growing in our relationship with him are real desires of ours. However, we may have never been shown ways to practically accomplish those goals. These devotionals are designed to help guide you through different steps as you spend time with God during your week.

We encourage you to set aside space for a daily rhythm of spending time with Jesus. That could be as short as 15 minutes each day or you may want to spend 30 to 45 minutes. It's up to you. Each day's devotion provides an opportunity to reflect, read, pray, and take action in response to your time with God. May God meet you powerfully in this season!

These devotions are written and developed by Molly Ovenden. If you would like to read more of her work or learn more about her creative endeavors, you can visit her website at <https://mollyovenden.com/>

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### Week 5 : Day 1

 STORY

#### Imagine this:

Growing up there was a particular neighbor who was special to you. She was a great friend of the family. She was like a mother to you. She taught you how to bake. She taught you how to take care of a kitchen: prepping for family meals, using each utensil and appliance in the best way.

Many Saturday mornings you wandered over to your neighbor's house. It was partly the mouth-watering fragrance emitted from her open windows that drew you, but something else drew you, too.

While you'd work in the kitchen together (sometimes your work included the crucial job of "Executive Taste Tester"), you'd ask her questions about food, about life, about why certain things at school felt exciting and scary at the same time, about why certain things at home felt sad. She told you about her childhood. She shared her hopes and dreams. She shared stories from her life and what sugary treats her bakery prepared only on a Monday as a pick-me-up to start the week.

You loved your family and usually got along well at home. You enjoyed your Friday nights playing card games and Sunday afternoons by the lake, but something magnetic took you to your neighbor's doorstep day after day...for years. You always felt like you could say anything to her and it would be okay.

She brought cookies to your little league games. She created elaborate cake sculptures for your siblings' and your birthdays. She even continued the bakery love by sending you and your roommates care packages each month when you went away to college. Summers and school vacations brought you back to her house for the conversations.

She often had answers about making big life decisions, but mostly she listened as she put another plate or pan of freshly baked goodies on the table in front of you.

But, now as you reflect on those childhood memories, you feel a mix of abundant joy with deep sadness because she passed away a few years ago. You miss the pastries, of course, but what you miss more is the conversation and how you felt in her kitchen. Just talking. What was it that she said in the last conversation you had with her? You wonder how you could be like her to your neighbors.

What was that last piece of wisdom she'd given you? How do you feel as you remember this conversation? How do you want people to feel when they speak with you?

You sigh as the timer dings and pull a batch of her famous apple cinnamon muffins from the oven.

 SCRIPTURE

**John 6:35**

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

 REFLECT

- What part of scripture feels the most challenging? Why?
- What might God want to say to you about Himself as He declares "I am the bread of life"?
- You might want to write your reflections in your journal.

 PRAYER

God, I find it hard to pray. I feel busy. I don't really have time to put together a logical thought. I feel awkward talking to the air. I think I believe you're "there," but I feel like it'd be easier if you were like, physically here. I have stuff that probably you could help me with, but I'm not sure how to even ask for help. I think I like the idea that you are "the bread of life" because I'm constantly hungry for more—more love, more rest, more satisfaction in life, relationships, hoping for the future. God, satisfy me. And, please help me to pray. Help me to be aware of your presence. Could you make our relationship feel a bit more tangible today? That'd be really cool. Thanks, God.


 ACTION

**Grab Your Journal.**

Write your thoughts in response to the sermon, Alpha video, and/or the above scripture passage. You can set a timer for 5-10 minutes, if you'd like to focus for a time. Otherwise, give yourself a few moments to contemplate what you've read today and write whatever comes to mind. You may choose to journal out your own prayers or questions here, too.

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**Week 5 : Day 2**

 STORY

**Imagine this:**

You're a teacher. You love your job. You love connecting with your students. You love giving opportunities for new experiences and learning. And every once in a while you love rewarding your students for all of their hard work.

Today you decide you'll give special prizes for the first five students who finish their assignments. Normally, you're not allowed to give sugary prizes, but you got special permission. You wanted to conduct a little experiment. You hope it works well because you think there could be a significant lesson to go along with it.

When you announce that there will be prizes for finishing first, there's a buzz in the classroom. Everyone gets competitive and they all tease each other in a friendly way about how amazing the people are who finish first. Several kids scramble as the room turns silent and studious.

When the first student finishes their work, they come up and you give them a choice of fun size candy bar. Immediately, a collective groan breaks out when they choose their prize. You reassure them to get back to work, that there are prizes for the four students who finish next. As you're giving out treats, you notice that everyone is really focused on their work. For the first five who finished, you assign them a bingo board with nine more tasks related to today's lesson to complete during class. They each do a little dance back to their seats.

It takes a little while before the sixth person finishes. But when they do, they hang their head as they bring their work up to you at your desk.

"What's wrong?" you ask with a smile.

"I didn't finish fast enough, so I don't get a prize," the student mumbles, not making eye contact.

You're still smiling, because you know your plan. "Actually," you say, as you pull out a big box you'd hidden under your desk, "you do get a prize."

This student's eyes light up and they gasp, "Really?"

You announce to the classroom that the students who finish their work in the next 15 minutes will get to choose from this box which has full size candy bars in it. Some of the first five students look up from their work and look disappointed, their empty candy wrappers on their desks and chocolate still smeared on their mouths. For the students who finish over the course of the next 15 minutes, you give them a checklist of five more tasks related to the lesson to complete in the remainder of class time. Almost all of the remaining students finish within that timeframe and bounce with glee as they show off their full size candy bars.

But, not everyone finishes, though. With just a few minutes left of class time, the last two students finally come up to your desk. They did the best they could, but they struggled to finish when everyone else had. Nonetheless, you pull open your desk drawer for the two of them and hand them each a mega king-sized candy bar along with a worksheet that has just one more task to complete related to the lesson. They couldn't believe it. They didn't think they'd get a prize today.

When the rest of the class saw the gigantic candy bars these last two students received, and that they only has one more task to do when the first five students had nine tasks, several call out to you, "It's not fair!" They each have their reasons why they think it's not fair.

You explain calmly and with a smile that you hope that each student has enjoyed their treat for working hard today. And you give one piece of homework: "Write a one page essay on what you think and feel about how the day went today and why you feel it was fair for me to give the prizes I gave to each of you."

Just now, the bell rings for class to finish, and you begin tidying up the classroom. Most of the students leave immediately, some with smiles, some with puzzled looks. But the two students who finished last come up to you.

"Why did you give us the biggest prize when we took the longest?"

You smile and ask them, "Why do you think I did that?"

They shrug.

"That's what your assignment is for tonight. Consider why I might have done that and write your essay about these ideas. Okay?"

They nod, unsure and turn to leave. Just before they reach the door, they both turn around, clutching their huge candy bars and with big grins, they shout, "Thank you!"

You smile. It's your assignment to contemplate that tonight, too, about how your experiment worked out.

 SCRIPTURE

**Matthew 20:1-15**

<sup>1</sup> “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> He agreed to pay them a denarius[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

<sup>3</sup> “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ <sup>5</sup> So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’


<sup>7</sup> “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

<sup>8</sup> “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

<sup>9</sup> “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. <sup>12</sup> ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

<sup>13</sup> “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup> Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’”

 REFLECT

- Which aspect of this scripture feels hopeful to you today? Why?
- What might God want to say to you about grace? About generosity? About justice? About mercy?
- You might want to write your reflections in your journal.

 PRAYER

Jesus, there are a lot of people who I think have messed up and hurt me. How can I show grace toward them? Actually... Jesus, I have really messed up and hurt people, too. I’m sorry for hurting these people and acting selfishly. I’m sorry for not supporting them, not helping them, not forgiving them.

Would you help me, Jesus? I’m going to take a deep breath now, and ask for forgiveness from you.

I'm receiving this gift of forgiveness and grace you have for me. And, I'm trusting you to forgive these people through me. I'm choosing that forgiveness and I'm willing to receive it, too. There's so much I don't understand about grace. But it seems like a good deal for me, so I'll take it. Jesus, would you show me a little bit more today about how I can live with grace, love, mercy, and generosity?

 ACTION

**Engage your senses.**

Invite a few friends or family members together. Ask everyone to bring their favorite sweets, candy bar or other snack treat. When people arrive, lay out the treats on the table and explain that you're all going to do a quality test and rate each based on various characteristics.

Make sure each person has a piece of paper and pen to write on. At the top of the page, each person will write the name of the treat and then one-by-one, you'll analyze the treats using all five of your senses (i.e.: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell). Consider the packaging, the flavor combinations, what the full sensory experience is to consume this treat. Everyone takes notes on each treat.

Once everyone has sampled each treat. Have a conversation about what you observed about each snack. When everyone has shared something about their experience, you can finish eating any of the leftover snacks and continue the conversations wherever it leads.

Then, when you can, set a timer for 5-10 minutes and write a journal entry to reflect about this sensory experience.

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## Week 5 : Day 3

 STORY

**Imagine this:**

Your brother gives you a ride to the train station. He had done the research to make sure you could get on the express train so you could be back home in 40 minutes instead of the normal train that would take nearly two hours, stopping at every station along the way. You are really grateful for his thoughtfulness. You arrive at the station to purchase your ticket at 10:11. Your train is at 10:21. That's plenty of time. As you walk through the ticket barriers, your eyes search the screens overhead to find which platform the 10:21 train will leave from.

You walk to Platform 2a and wait. The passengers gather in a crowd. The platform sign flashes an update. The 10:21 train will be delayed, expected at 10:31. A loudspeaker announcement apologizes for delays due to high winds and electric lines down on the line. 10:31 will still get you back sooner than the slow train. You smile, make eye contact with the train station staff, and take a deep breath.

Another announcement on the loudspeaker crackles overhead. The 10:21 train has been moved to Platform 3. You chuckle at the minor inconvenience and make your way over to Platform 3. 10:31 comes and goes on the clock and still no train comes. The screen flashes, “10:21 – CANCELED.” Now you need to find a different train to take. You laugh aloud this time at the irony of getting early to get on the express train, only to have to take the slow train that’s delayed.

You notice quite a few people in this same situation as you. You think, *I could get really stressed and frustrated about this, or I could be a calming presence and make friends.* You decide to start talking to people. You look around and make eye contact with a group of ladies who look like they are going on a trip for the weekend: they’re dressed nicely and have small rolling suitcases. You find out what they’re up to and what they’re going to do about the train. “Shall we stick together?” You smile and laugh at the awkward situation. “Sure!” they say.

You get talking and start to find out about their families and what’s so important about this fancy weekend away. Over the course of the conversation you wander through the train station to various platforms and even get on one train together before the announcement crackles overhead again to say that the train will no longer be traveling via your destination, so you pile out of the train.

But, instead of feeling lonely and aimless as your plans keep changing, you feel happy. The group of ladies are laughing again and start chatting happily with a family of three trying to get to the airport. Their conversation is light, now that they’ve connected to try and solve the issue together, mainly by being patient.

You turn and see two people who look like they’re in college with backpacks and headphones in, one holds a couple of large textbooks, the other holds a shopping bag. They have worried expressions on their faces. You smile and say, “hello!” It’s not always the most socially appropriate thing to do, to talk to strangers, but you greet them nonetheless.

They both smile with perceivable effort. You ask where they’re trying to get to. As you listen, you learn one girl is trying to surprise her mom—it’s her first time on the train and it’s so stressful that, she says, if she ever ends up getting to her mom, she’s never riding the train again. The other has been away with friends for a few days and just is trying to get home to sleep and then study the rest of the weekend for exams.

“Want to be travel buddy friends?” you ask, “at least until we can get on a train that isn’t canceled?” Everyone nods and laughs with relief.

Eventually, a train comes that you can actually get on. It’s been over an hour and a half of waiting and wandering platform to platform with delayed and canceled trains. The three of you get on the same traincar and vow to stick together. And then, miracle of miracles, you all cheer as the train announces its departure and apologizes for the delay over the loudspeaker.

There's nothing you can do to make the train go faster. Unfortunately, you don't know how to travel back in time and change your original plans to arrange alternative travel logistics.

Others sitting near you groan and you make eye contact with knowing nods of frustration and again, you choose to smile and offer casual conversation about what's annoying, what you're hoping to do if you ever get off the train and out of the train station. You meet Elena who's on vacation and annoyed that she's missing time with friends. You meet Jose and Amelia who are on their honeymoon. And, you meet Jake who has to call in to work to say he's not coming in because he's stuck on the train and he worries that he's going to get fired.

As each of these conversations take place, you wonder if you've made a difference in showing kindness toward strangers. You wonder if having this simple exchange of what's going on in your present together was worth you overcoming your social anxiety and introvertedness and your desire to escape the mess of changing plans and listen to your podcast, ignoring everyone.

Finally, you arrive at your stop and you exchange eye contact with everyone you talked to and say friendly goodbyes. You step off the train and breathe the fresh air, hours after you'd planned to arrive.

You smile when you notice the ladies going away for the weekend are just up ahead of you—they managed to get on the same train as you.


"We made it!" you cheer with them. They smile and wave as you exit the train station and get on with your day.

*What else might happen that's out of my control today?* You take a deep breath and hope there's nothing else that will go quite so wrong.

 READ

"When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the driver." –Corrie Ten Boom

Take notes on what thoughts come to mind when you read this quote. You may want to add your thoughts into considering the following reflections or prayers.

 REFLECT

- When have you had an experience of the darkness of the unknown?
- Why do you think this unknown experience has had such a significant impact on you?
- What do you wish could be different about your situation?
- What would it look like for you to have peaceful, trusting responses instead of anxiety?



 PRAYER

Jesus, would you take my hand and lead me to the Father? I don't know if I can get there on my own. In fact, I'm pretty sure I can't. I think I want to, though. There's so much in my life that's out of my control. Father God, help me to trust you with what I can't see. Holy Spirit, guide me through my day today when I don't know what to expect. Lead me because I don't know which way to go. Jesus, thank you for making a way for me to meet with you. I know you can make our relationship even more real for me to know you more. Thanks, Jesus. Amen.

 ACTION

**Get Creative.**

Grab a pen and scrap of paper. Whatever you have in front of you is great. It doesn't have to be fancy. Spend a few minutes doodling a cartoon of the train journey from the story. As you draw, consider how you were feeling in that situation, how you'd like to show up if that had happened to you.


Notice which details you want to include. Do you draw speech bubbles for the conversations? Do you use thought bubbles to capture everyone's unvoiced frustrations? Do you include luggage and outfits and facial expressions? Do you shade the characters to create depth? Do you draw trains on the platform in perspective?

There is no wrong way to sketch this cartoon. What it looks like in the end isn't what matters. Instead, it's about the process of what happens when you put pen to paper.

Once you've spent what feels like enough time, perhaps 5-10 minutes, you might want to write your reflections in your journal when you finish.

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## Week 5 : Day 4

 STORY

**Imagine this:**

You woke up with a headache this morning and the coffee pot shorted so you missed your morning's steady routine. Your dog threw up in the hallway and as you tried to wrangle Rudolph into his kennel, you stepped in the vomit. You had to wash your foot off and change your jeans because the cuff got gross, too.

Now, you're sat at your desk, trying to concentrate. The email inbox continues to chime with each new request that you don't feel capable of doing. The cursor flashes on your meeting notes and today's agenda. Your cat, Stella, is rubbing up against your laptop and puts her tail over the camera.

You quickly type a message, "sorry my cat is crazy :palm to face: emoji," in the chat box. Then, you turn your camera off while you pet Stella to appease her, shaking her treat bag to entice her out of your office.

One of your colleagues is sharing about their crazy morning and ideas for creating a more efficient system for this quarter's project. You turn your camera back on and

wonder if you should share your ideas. You wonder if what you have to share is helpful or would distract the team. You decide to nod silently and keep your ideas to yourself.

The meeting ends and you take a break for lunch. While you munch a raw, unpeeled carrot and a bag of gummy worms, you make a grocery list. Your phone pings. It's your friend from work.

“Hey! Are you okay? 😺” Want to talk over lunch?

You take a deep breath as you feel the emotions rise and you know you have a choice here. You can decide to be honest and call your friend. Or, you can crush the emotion out of your life, and lie, saying you're doing great.

Your phone rings. Your friend from work is calling you.

Will you answer the phone?

 SCRIPTURE

**Matthew 6:9-13**

“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,

<sup>10</sup> your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread.

<sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.

 REFLECT

- If it's true that God is your Father, how would you like to respond?
- What can you express gratitude for to God?
- What do you need to ask forgiveness for?
- What do you want God to do for you today?

 PRAYER

Okay, God, this feels a little formal, but in the Bible it says Jesus taught his disciples to pray like this, so I'm going to try it...Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

 ACTION

**Relational moment.**

Think of a work friend. If you're not in work right now, think of a friend from an activity you're involved in, or an old school friend or neighbor. Give this person a call and ask them how they are really doing.


You may want to share some of what you're learning this week or something you're struggling with or celebrating. You might even want to ask for prayer or offer to pray for your friend.

As you anticipate calling a friend on the phone to check in, what are you aware of? Do you feel anxious to call them? Does it feel normal to call your friend? Do you worry about what you would talk about?

After you call your friend to talk, reflect on how you feel after making this connection.

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**Week 5 : Day 5**

 STORY

**Imagine this:**

You feel all the worries of the week piling up. It's almost tangible. Your neck aches and your arms feel heavy like you're literally carrying the worry.

It's Friday and you've not done that errand yet and you forgot to call your sister on her birthday. Your phone pings a cheerful good morning tone, but instead it's a low balance alert from your bank account. You set your phone down and get up to make a sandwich.

You find cheese and stale bread. You hope you will be able to get something healthy for the weekend from the food pantry. You've only gone there a couple of times and you worry what people think of you having to go there.

It's not been that long since you got laid off from work, only a few weeks now, but there isn't anywhere local hiring for the type of work you're trained in. And it feels really scary to try a new job and you're not sure if you should settle and just get any job in the meantime or if you should persist and find something that you're skilled in.

You wonder, Is this a sign to trust you, God? Is this a sign to be brave and try something new?

You remember something your grandma stitched on a frilly pastel cushion when you were little. You didn't understand it then, but you can't get it out of your mind now.

You try praying, "God," you whisper. "I really need you now. I need a breakthrough. I need something. I need food on the table, money in the bank, and a car that works. And I'd really like it if my sister and I could get back on speaking terms. I feel angry and hurt about that, but I feel like I need her to make the first move. She has to be the one

that reaches out.”

You sigh and take a bite of your dry cheese sandwich. Sun shines through the windows onto the table and you close your eyes.

“God, thank you for the sunshine. I am really glad about that. And thank you that I have this cheese sandwich even though it’s nasty. I’m glad you gave me a roof over my head so that last night’s thunderstorm didn’t soak me.”

Your phone dings. It’s an alert from a job site you’d been using to apply for jobs online. You have a notification that a local business has messaged you. It’s a company you actually like and think would be cool to work with. You catch yourself from getting too excited, but you feel grateful.

“Thanks, God.” You take a deep breath and feel peace start to surround you.

You finish eating your sandwich and think about what it could be like to work for this company.

Your phone dings again. It’s a text from your friend down the street. “Hey. Food pantry tomorrow AM w/ me? Don’t wanna go alone. -J”

Then, before you can reply, your phone rings. It’s your sister.

 SCRIPTURE

**Philippians 4:6-7**

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

 ACTION

**Examen.**

Reflect on your week using an ancient spiritual practice called, examen. You may want to add these examen reflections to your other journal entries from this week.

You can spend as little or as long as you’d like on each stage of this examen process. However, if this is a new practice or if you’re short on time, you can start with 1 to 5 minutes for each stage of the examen.

- a) Consider this week’s consolations - What good happened this week that filled me up, brought me joy, gave me energy? Why, God, did this fill me up? Where were you in this moment/instance/experience? God, thanks for being here with me in the consolations.
- b) Consider this week’s desolations - What bad happened this week that drained me, felt sad or angering, emptied me? God, why did this empty me? Where were you in this moment/instance/experience? Thanks for being here with me in the desolations.

- c) Ask God: What do you want to say to me today about talking to you? About having a relationship with me? About how much you love me?
- d) Ask God: What do you think of me? What have you given me awareness for today that's more than I had at the beginning of the week?
- e) Spend a moment thanking God for showing up—even if it wasn't how you'd expected.