

Devotional: GOD'S JOY WITH US

From YouVersion

DAY ONE

Calming: Laying a Foundation of Peace

Research shows that the number one predictor of emotional stability is the ability to quiet ourselves from upset emotions. There have been a lot of memes and posters telling us to “Keep Calm and do something.” The reality, however, is that calming ourselves takes more than just choosing not to feel overwhelmed.

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. It embodies the idea that I am okay because God is in control. I have peace because someone is with me who is not afraid and is able to handle whatever I am facing. As our Father, God is like the parent who helps us stay calm during the storm because He is safe, calm, and able to help us smile even in the midst of the thunder and lightning.

From a brain science perspective, calming has to do with quieting our bodies when emotions fill us with energy or drain us of life. One of the key practices for quieting our bodies is breathing. The reason this is so important is that taking control of your breathing helps you take control of your body. Box Breathing is a common practice taught in the military to help soldiers overcome their anxiety and stay calm.

Practice Exercise:

Calming quiets our bodies from upsetting emotions and deep breathing is a proven method for calming our bodies. Find a comfortable position and practice Box Breathing. Count to four with a deep breath in and hold to the count of four. Then exhale to the count of four and pause for a count of four. Continue this sequence for three minutes. Notice how your body feels when you are finished.

Psalm 103:1-3

DAY TWO

Appreciation: Building a Foundation of Joy

The fastest way for your brain to grow joy is to practice appreciation. Brain science has confirmed this, but the Bible has urged us to build the habit of appreciation for millennia. We enter into God's gates with praise and his courts with thanksgiving" (Psalm 100:4). In Paul's epistle to the Philippians, which he wrote from prison, he encourages his readers to practice gratitude which he practices while he reflects on and prays for the people with joy.

Research shows that the practice of getting your brain into a state of appreciation for five consecutive minutes two or three times each day can do more to transform a fear house into a joy house than nearly anything else you can do. Some of us confuse saying thank you with feeling appreciation. I can choose to say thank you as a duty or an act of obedience, but that is not the same as letting your mind and body enter into a state of appreciation. Moving beyond the simple choice to say thank you into the practice of enjoying the small things in life can be life changing.

To grow a life of joy, we can start by thinking of past, present, even future moments of joy. This means we reflect on the things, people and interactions we look forward to with excitement. We spend time actively reflecting on the positive joy thoughts for several minutes. We reflect on the memories of joy that make us smile. When we relive these memories can reactivate the same feelings of joy as when we first experienced them. It just takes a little time to enter into the experience.

Practice Exercise:

Remembering times of joy from the past activates a joy response in our mind and body. This primes us for more joy in the present. Take several minutes to reflect on special moments of joy from the past week. Share your joy with another person in the form of a conversational story, text, picture, or phone call.

Phil. 1:3-6

DAY THREE

Storytelling: Remembering Who You Are

The Bible is full of stories. Stories allow us to enter someone else's experiences and imagine their emotions. We can imagine what Jacob must have felt when he woke up and found Leah lying next to him. We can also imagine what Leah felt knowing she was the unloved sister.

Learning to tell stories about our own emotions is an important skill for quieting ourselves from our upsets. Stories also remind us how it is like us to act in times of difficulty. When emotions get the best of us, it is easy to forget who we are and to turn into someone else. One of the hallmarks of maturity is the ability to stay being our "true" selves even when enduring hardship.

At many key moments in Scripture, people had to be reminded to remember who they were. Peter reminded his readers that they were strangers and aliens in this world and to live holy lives as those who had been made holy (1 Peter 2:11). If you have ever seen the Disney movie Lion King, you probably remember the scene where Simba is told in a vision of his father that he has forgotten his true identity and has turned into someone he was not meant to be. The words, "Remember who you are," echoed through the night as the vision faded. They reminded him that he was born to be a king and it was time to start acting like one by thinking of those who needed him to lead.

We need to practice telling stories of times that we remembered who we were despite upsetting emotions. Such stories are reminders that our big emotions don't have to have the final word in driving the way we live. It is possible to act like ourselves even when life is hard.

Practice Exercise:

Reflecting on memories of joy trains us to feel joy in the present and expect joy in the future. Share a story about a favorite trip you took or time spent at a favorite spot (like a lake, a house, or a dorm room). Share your story and thoughts with a friend.

Ps 107:1-9

Take the time to read the whole chapter (vss 1-43). It will encourage you!

DAY FOUR

Attacking Toxic Thoughts: Winning the Battle for Your Mind

Spiritual warfare is often focused on the battle for our minds. The devil is a liar and a hunter. He loves to set traps for us by whispering thoughts that feel true but lead us down a path that ends in destruction. As we read in Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way *that seems* right to a man, but its end *is* the way of death." Jesus echoed this theme in Matthew 7 when He told the disciples, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide *is* the gate and broad *is* the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (13-14).

Some emotions, like anxiety, are completely rooted in our thought life. Anxiety is caused by imagining bad things that could happen. This is why Paul told us to fight anxiety by thinking about what was good and true and lovely and excellent. (Philippians 4:8) He understood that toxic thinking sabotages healthy living.

Whether your battle is with anxiety, shame, despair, or some other negative emotion, the key to victory is developing a battle strategy for replacing toxic thoughts with Spirit-led, Scripture-based thoughts. Ask yourself, "What toxic thinking routinely fills my mind when I feel anger (or some other oppressive emotion)?" Then ask, "What would Jesus want me to believe instead?" It is not enough to suppress toxic thinking; we need to replace the thoughts with what is good.

Practice Exercise:

Increasing our joy trains our brains to look for good things in life and relationships. Just like looking at a field and focusing on the flowers we can enjoy instead of the bees that can sting us, we learn to notice joy when it crosses our path. Find a comfortable place to sit where you can look at something beautiful. It may be in nature (like a sunset, a tree, or water). It may be something in your immediate environment (like a piece of furniture or the decor). Focus on what you enjoy about this moment. Share your thoughts with a friend or family member.

Phil. 4:4-9

DAY FIVE

Building Good Habits: Learning Satisfaction

Learning to grow joy means we find what is satisfying. We avoid pursuits that leave us feeling empty. We actively seek out what really matters. Few things will rob our joy and peace like constantly searching for the activities, successes, accomplishments, behaviors and more that we believe will make us feel good. Searching for “the next best thing” leaves us feeling hollow and unsatisfied. The good news is we can be like Paul in Philippians 4 where we learn to be content no matter the circumstances. This will free us up to enjoy God’s gifts so we find hope and peace.

The Wisdom literature of the Bible teaches us a lot about satisfaction. The writer of Ecclesiastes 5 says, “The sleep of a laboring man **is** sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep” (12). God’s people can learn to be content and find satisfaction in life and relationships. We learn satisfaction when we practice focusing on the small and simple things in life. We take the time to reflect on the moments from our day that were meaningful. We scan our day and review our relational interactions to find what was special. During meals we can notice and appreciate the fellowship as well as the food. We take time from our busy schedules to pause and thank God for His goodness in our life. We ask, “What from my day was memorable? What stands out as a peaceful or joyful moment? What did I enjoy today? What surprised me today?” We end our days thanking God for being with us. The air in our lungs. The clothes on our backs. The food in our stomach. We learn to actively reflect on and even share the good things with other people.

Looking into Ecclesiastes, we find even more wisdom on the joy of living with satisfaction. We read, “Here is what I have seen: *It is* good and fitting *for one* to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it *is* his heritage (18).” Our portion and allotment is to savor the good things God has given us. We can find the good stuff even while we navigate the hard stuff. God’s people are meant to be the kind of people who thank their Creator for life. We practice gratitude on a regular basis. We remember appreciation moments and share these stories with our family and community. Sharing becomes the invitation for others to experience the joy.

Practice Exercise:

We reflect on times of joy to train our brain to feel some satisfaction and peace. Identify a favorite relational encounter from your year, then share your thoughts with that person (or someone else) including why this interaction was meaningful.

Psalms 34:1-10

Take the time to read and meditate on the whole chapter (vss 1-22). It will encourage you!