

WEEK 1: Not an Island

"I thank my God every time I remember you." (Philippians 1:3, NIV)

Not too long ago, I experienced quite a challenge with service providers who were making my job harder than it needed to be. As I parked my car and walked to the office, I thought to myself: "I wish I were on an island where I could just do everything myself!"

Being pregnant at the time, and with quite a severe cough, I had to go to the doctor for a routine check-up that day. He had barely started with the examination when I had a coughing spell, and after listening to my lungs, he immediately admitted me to hospital with pneumonia. His rooms are in a hospital about 30 minutes from my house, and I didn't have chance to go home and fetch sleepwear, a toothbrush and a phone charger, and my husband had to beat traffic to get home to look after our toddler and couldn't come to the hospital again. What to do?

I phoned a colleague whose mother and sister live close to the hospital and asked if it would be okay to contact them and ask for a few necessities. Naturally, it was no problem, and in a short space of time I had a complete hospital bag by my bedside, and visitors with a much-needed cup of coffee.

At that moment, my own words from earlier that day rang in my ears!

I was taught a valuable lesson that day: God didn't intend for us to stand on our own. He gave us life and love, fellowship and friendship, community and companionship.

Let's thank Him for being a God of relationships and embrace those around us as we serve Him together.

WEEK 2: Who Do You Call On?

"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28, NIV)

During a recent stint in hospital, I noticed that the tap in the bathroom was dripping. We live in a drought-stricken area and are subject to severe water restrictions, and to top it off there was a "Save Water" poster on the wall next to the dripping tap, so I was very conscious of the need for it to be fixed.

When the nurse came to check on me, I immediately reported the problem and stressed that we should do something about it quickly to prevent wasting more water. Night time came, and the tap was still dripping, so at various times I reported it to the night staff, the nurse in the ward, the tea lady, and anyone who would listen.

The next day, the public relations officer of the hospital checked in on me and wanting to find out how I was being treated. I said to her that I didn't have any complaints, but I did want to report the dripping tap. She made a note and left.

Not even an hour later, a maintenance man with the biggest toolbox I've ever seen walked into the room and asked if he could occupy the bathroom for a while to fix the tap. I was thrilled, and in no time, the tap was fixed.

It made me think: why do we so often run to anyone who might listen and not to the One who invites us to come to Him, the One who is able to solve our problems? I've once heard someone say, "Run to the Throne, not the phone!"

Let's run to our Heavenly Father first with our questions, complaints and needs, but also with thanksgiving, praise and honour, instead of first seeking help from men.

WEEK 3: What You Were Created For

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5, NIV)

It has often happened that I've learnt a spiritual lesson from food! One such time was when I bought a box of grapes.

I was living on my own, so buying a 1.5kg box of grapes to devour by oneself might sound strange, but grapes are one of my favourite kinds of fruit and I knew I would have no trouble eating the whole box by myself. It was a carefully selected box of delicious, juicy and extra-large "red globes" – my favourite kind.

I put the box in the fridge and couldn't wait for them to cool so that I could start enjoying my treat. When I opened the box, I saw there was one particular bunch with exceptionally large grapes that were dark purple in colour. The bunch was perfect on so many levels! It made me think of the grapes that the spies brought back when they gathered information about the "land of milk and honey" in the time of Joshua. I decided to save that particular bunch till last.

A few days later, that bunch was the only one left. I was looking forward to it so much and could imagine how good it would taste. I took the bunch, rinsed it and walked onto the balcony to savour my special bunch of grapes.

As I bit into the first one, I could barely contain my disgust – it was really sour! I couldn't believe that something that looked so good could taste so bad. But maybe it was just that one grape? Full of hope, I bit into the next one. The disappointment was overwhelming – it was sour too, and so were the third and the fourth, etc.

I learned a hard lesson that day: our lives mean nothing if we look good from the outside but are bad on the inside. It does not matter if we look 'perfect' to the world – it matters if we fail to become what we were created to be.

Let's focus less on the outside and more on God's design for our lives. He desires to live in relationship with us, and everything else that's good and true and pure will flow from that place of oneness with our Creator.

WEEK 4: Never Too Young

"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Jesus said, 'Have the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish." (John 6:9-11, NIV)

I pack quite an elaborate lunchbox for my toddler to enjoy during snack time at his playschool. It's filled with various kinds of things – just because I don't know what he'll actually feel like eating on a particular day. Of course, I don't expect him to eat everything I pack, but I don't want him to be hungry. I do, however, expect him to share with his friends if there is a need.

One day while I was packing my son's lunchbox, I thought about the story of the boy who had two fish and five loaves in his "lunchbox". I was wondering how old he was and tried to imagine how it came about that he was also part of the crowd listening to Jesus on the day that He fed all those people. I pictured the boy's mother packing him lunch just before he ran out of the house, excited to see Jesus of whom he had heard so much.

Of all the people in the crowd that day, a little boy and his lunch would be instrumental in Jesus' hands and would feed the whole crowd.

We should teach our children that they're never too young to be used by God – they only need to be a follower of Jesus and to offer what they have.

WEEK 5: Total Dependency

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man He made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. ‘For in Him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are His offspring.’” (Acts 17:24-28, NIV)

As a new mom, I'm continually overwhelmed by the thought that my baby is completely dependent on me for everything. A baby can basically do nothing without his mother or primary caregiver.

It made me wonder whether I, as an adult, really am dependant on anyone or anything else, and if I really know what it means to be totally dependent on God.

I realised that I don't know how to be one hundred percent dependent on God and to trust Him to be enough. Why is it so difficult to fully surrender and to look to Him for everything? He wants to be a good Father and desires intimacy.

Next time when I try to get something done on my own, I'll picture myself as a tiny baby who looks to his mother for everything he needs and thank God that He is enough for me!

WEEK 6: Feelings Lie

“‘What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?’ ‘The first,’ they answered. Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.’” (Matthew 21:28-31, NIV)

I used to be quite emotional in my teens and early twenties – in a drama-queen kind of way.

I would also often make decisions based on what felt right at the time. Needless to say, my judgment was somewhat clouded more often than not.

Rather frequently, I would also be able to come up with an excuse why I couldn't or shouldn't do something that I sometimes even knew (had I used my mind) would be the better option. This meant I would even justify my actions although I was wrong.

There were two sayings that helped me overcome being a victim of circumstance, always finding an excuse for or justifying my actions or sometimes my lack of taking action. One was: "Feelings lie – own your actions and take responsibility!" At the time, those were harsh words, but I needed to hear them.

The second one was said by a friend when I told her how I didn't have time to do proper Bible study or didn't feel like going to church. She said: "Remember, it's first the motion and then the emotion."

I've learnt that taking action in spite of your feelings holds blessing!

WEEK 7: God Never Sleeps

“My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip — He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” (Psalm 121:2-4, NIV)

I've always liked a solid eight hours of sleep at night. That changes quickly once you have a baby and even more so when you have two!

Preserving sleep soon became my first priority. I arranged the house and household in such a way as to favour maximum sleep.

One night, my husband wasn't home and I was alone with the two children. During the early morning hours, they both woke up. I got them back to sleep by feeding the baby and comforting the toddler. An hour or so later, the baby woke up again, and when I had just gotten him back to sleep, my older son woke up again. He wanted milk. I would usually not give him a bottle at night, but I was desperate to go back to sleep.

When he finally went back to sleep, I got back into bed. Every now and then, I would hear a little noise from one of the kids and I remember praying that they would not wake up. I also ignored the little sounds, hoping they would not escalate to crying and that I wouldn't need to get up to check on them.

I thought to myself how glad I am that God doesn't sleep or slumber. I'm trying to be the best mom I can be and still fall short by prioritising my sleep instead of getting up to check on the kids all the time.

What a good Father we have! He always watches over us. He is never too tired to check on us and help or comfort us.

WEEK 8: Inside Out

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’” (1 Samuel 16:7, NIV)

I have often looked at or listened to people and drawn conclusions about them that were later proved wrong, which made me ashamed of my assumptions.

One of my heroes of faith fled from his country and was granted asylum in another country. The only job he could find was working as a janitor even though he was highly educated and had held positions of influence in his home country.

I didn't know this about him when I first met him, and absolutely loved listening to him.

When I heard his story, I wondered if I would have even given him a second glance if he were the janitor at my university. I would have probably just walked past him and not even said good morning.

Let's make a conscious decision to look at other people through God's eyes, rather than relying on our human knowledge and what we perceive to be the truth about someone.

WEEK 9: By My Spirit

“So he said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.’” (Zechariah 4:6, NIV)

So often one is frustrated with family, friends, neighbours or colleagues who just cannot see your point or are on a destructive path and won't listen to reason. In our area, we frequently hear of parents going through the most terrible heartache because their children are addicted to drugs.

At a wedding, the preacher said to the couple that they shouldn't try to convince one another or try to change their partner's mind, especially if it would cause more conflict – they should rather pray earnestly for their partner and speak life into the spirit of their husband or wife.

This is such good advice for all relationships. Yes, it is important to communicate with one another, but do it prayerfully. And when you still hit a brick wall, heed God's Word and change minds not by might nor by power, but by His Spirit.

This also applies to missions: it's not our job to make converts – we are merely called to prayerfully sow the seed of the Gospel. God will make it grow by His Spirit.

WEEK 10: Build Altars

“... Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.” (Joshua 4:5-7, NIV)

While writing this series of devotions, I called into memory things that have happened to me from which I've learnt a spiritual lesson.

At first, it seemed like a daunting task to write ten devotions, but after the first one, I realised that I merely had to revisit the 'altars' I've built along the way in my walk with the Lord.

It was then that I realised how important these altars are. We need to remember the lessons, the answered prayers, the trials and the victories – it all contributes to a growing faith.

There are few better ways to overcome when circumstances threaten to destroy us than revisiting those altars where God has come through for us – where He taught us, embraced us, gave us victory and showed us grace.

It's when we remember that we praise God for He is!