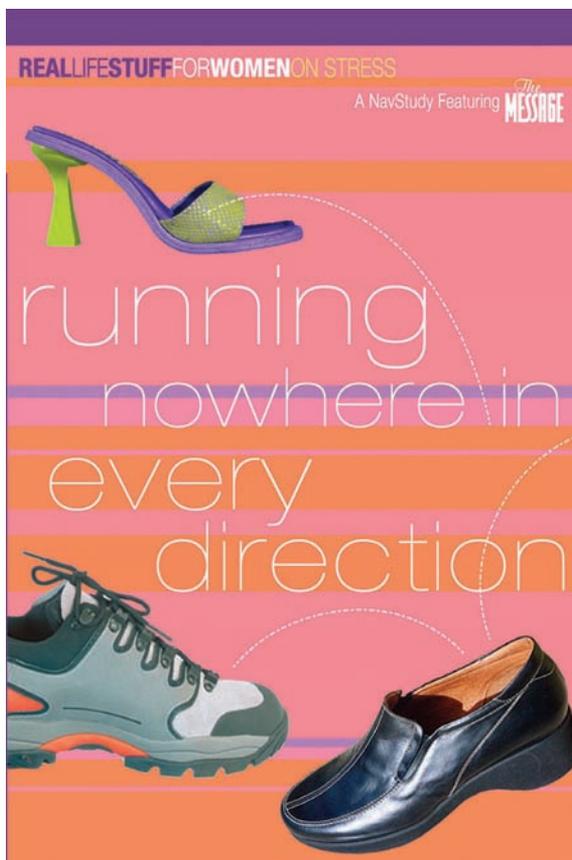


# My Schedule

## LESSON ONE

From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# my schedule

## the beginning place

Take a moment to think about your schedule. Grab that first reaction—when you read the word *schedule*, did you shut your eyes and wince? Hold your breath or let out a deep sigh? Feel like throwing this book across the room? Smile about the great plans you have to look forward to today?

Chances are that if you're married with children, you spend a lot of time shuttling kids here and there, or getting them ready to be shuttled. Laundry, meals, Back-to-School Night—your to-do list goes on and on, and that doesn't even count what your husband needs from you. Maybe on top of taking care of your family you've got a paying job because without your income, the mortgage wouldn't get paid. Wouldn't life be easier if you were single?

If you're single, you're probably shouting *No!* You work full-time, and unless you have a great roommate, nobody's sharing the bills, errands, and household chores with you. You're on your own, and you feel it. Furthermore, unless you can survive practically and emotionally as a hermit, you have to devote at least some time to friends and perhaps to “the quest for the Holy Grail,” a decent husband. All this is hard enough if you're single and childless, but if you're a single mom, heaven help you.

So how's it going, really? Please don't say, “Fine.” For the duration of this study, drop that word from your vocabulary. It's too easy to say, “I'm fine,” when you're not, to say your schedule isn't that bad.

If you're exhausted, scared, frustrated, unhappy, please say so. Or if you're challenged, excited, well-rested, and motivated, say that, too.

Use the space below to summarize your beginning place for this lesson. Describe the reality of your schedule as well as your dreams. We'll start here and then go deeper.

read the end of a loooong day

From the *Today's Christian Woman* article "Not Tonight, Dear . . ." by Jill Eggleton Brett<sup>1</sup>

**Note:** If you're married with children, start with the first reading, "Not Tonight, Dear . . ." If you're single, skip to the next reading, from *The Devil Wears Prada*.

I'd returned from running errands one afternoon when I walked into the house and saw my husband give me "The Look." The screen door banged behind me as my twin preschoolers ran over to me and wrapped themselves around each leg, squealing with delight. As I reached down to hug them, my husband gave me his signature shake of the head and said, "Hey, honey . . ." And I, as usual, rolled my eyes as I peeled the girls off my legs.

If your husband's anything like mine, you know what the "dot, dot, dot" means. Those little punctuation marks come at the most inconvenient times! I mean, come on, I'd just picked up the dry cleaning, bought his cousin a wedding gift, found new shoes for our twins, shopped for his favorite food for dinner that night. And now this—another chore. I was cranky and still had laundry to do. Not to mention I could hear my pillow calling in the distance.

But God had some lessons for me that night, and many more nights to follow. As I continued to shrug off my husband's sexual advances, tension continued to build. I grew colder, and he continually felt rejected. It was time to face the facts: I didn't want to have sex. I was too busy, too tired, and flat out didn't have the desire. I had two little people calling my name all day, wiping their noses on my pants, and vying for their turn on my lap. When the twins' bedtime arrived, I wanted personal space.

From *The Devil Wears Prada*, by Lauren Weisberger<sup>2</sup>

"How could you do this to me?" she hissed as she pushed me through *Runway's* reception-area doors and we hurtled together back to our desks. "As the senior assistant, I am responsible for

what goes on in our office. I know you're new, but I've told you from the very first day: we do not leave Miranda unattended."

"But Miranda's not here." It came out as a squeak.

"But she could've called while you were gone and no one would've been here to answer the . . . phone!" she screamed as she slammed the door to our suite. "Our first priority—our only priority—is Miranda Priestly. Period. And if you can't deal with that, just remember that there are millions of girls who would die for your job. Now check your voice mail. If she called, we're dead. *You're* dead."

I wanted to crawl inside my iMac and die. How could I have screwed up so badly during my very first week? Miranda wasn't even in the office and I'd already let her down. So what if I was hungry? It could wait. There were genuinely important people trying to get things done around here, people who depended on me, and I'd let them down. I dialed my mailbox.

"Hi, Andy, it's me." Alex. "Where are you? I've never heard you not answer. Can't wait for dinner tonight—we're still on, right? . . ." I'd immediately felt guilty, because I'd already decided after the whole lunch debacle that I'd rather reschedule. My first week had been so crazy that we'd barely seen each other, and we'd made a special plan to have dinner that night, just the two of us. But I knew it wouldn't be any fun if I fell asleep in my wine, and I kind of wanted a night to unwind and be alone.

## think

- How is your story like or unlike these stories?
- What stresses in your life come from children?
- What stresses come from paid work? What about from unpaid work (at home or volunteering)?
- What stresses stem from your husband, boyfriend, or lack thereof?

think (continued)

pray

Lord, please help me face . . .

read tell me how you *really* feel

Job 7:1-4

Human life is a struggle, isn't it?  
It's a life sentence to hard labor.  
Like field hands longing for quitting time  
and working stiffs with nothing to hope for but payday,  
I'm given a life that meanders and goes nowhere—  
months of aimlessness, nights of misery!  
I go to bed and think, "How long till I can get up?"  
I toss and turn as the night drags on—and I'm fed up!

Psalm 6:1-7

Please, God, no more yelling,  
no more trips to the woodshed.  
Treat me nice for a change;  
I'm so starved for affection.

Can't you see I'm black and blue,  
beat up badly in bones and soul?  
God, how long will it take  
for you to let up?

Break in, God, and break up this fight;  
if you love me at all, get me out of here.  
I'm no good to you dead, am I?  
I can't sing in your choir if I'm buried in some tomb!

I'm tired of all this—so tired. My bed  
has been floating forty days and nights  
On the flood of my tears.  
My mattress is soaked, soggy with tears.  
The sockets of my eyes are black holes;  
nearly blind, I squint and grope.

## think

- How, if at all, do you identify with the words of Job? How about with the psalmist?
- What do you typically do when you feel “starved for affection”?
- How do you imagine God responding to the psalmist? To Job?
- How easy is it for you to complain to God about your life? Why do you suppose that’s the case?

## pray

Father, what I most long for from you is . . .

## read too many worlds, too little time

From *The Connecting Church*, by Randy Frazee<sup>3</sup>

One of the underlying problems of the Johnsons and most people who live in the average American suburb (or international equivalent) is that they have too many worlds to manage. There are too many sets of relationships that do not connect with each other but all require time to maintain. Bob and Karen simply do not have enough time and energy to invest in each world of relationships in order to extract a sense of belonging and meaning for their lives.

Just think of the many disconnected worlds the Johnsons have to maintain: their own family, two places of work, church, a small group, the children's sports teams, the children's schools, extended family out of town, and neighbors. If we were to delve further into the Johnsons' lifestyle, we would discover many other worlds as well—old friends from high school and college, the last place they lived, and other relationship circles at church (for example, the women's Bible study group and the Mission Committee of which they are both members). . . .

If a true and workable solution is to emerge, it must involve a radical restructuring of our lifestyle. At the core of this restructuring is a new operating principle for living: *In order to extract a deeper sense of belonging, we must consolidate our worlds into one.* . . . The mission is to simplify our lifestyles in such a way that we concentrate more energy into a circle of relationships that produces a sense of genuine belonging. While this in no way suggests that we should be so narrow in our scope as to cut significant people out of our lives, it does reinforce the common-sense notion that we can go deeper with less to manage, and we *must* find a way to do this.

## think

- Make a list of the different worlds you have to maintain.
- To what degree do these worlds overlap? How does that affect the amount of time you spend with each person? How does it affect the depth of your relationships?
- How would your life be different if you had fewer worlds to maintain? For example, if your children's school friends and church friends knew each other?
- How do you respond to the idea of concentrating more energy into a circle of relationships that gives you a sense of genuinely belonging with those people? Does this mission seem desirable? Achievable? Wrongheaded? What makes you say that?
- What forces in your life make it hard to reduce the number of different worlds you have to juggle?

## pray

God, the challenges I'm dealing with here are . . .

## read a really rough lifestyle

### 2 Corinthians 11:24-33

I've worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather.

And that's not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches. When someone gets to the end of his rope, I feel the desperation in my bones. When someone is duped into sin, an angry fire burns in my gut.

If I have to "brag" about myself, I'll brag about the humiliations that make me like Jesus. The eternal and blessed God and Father of our Master Jesus knows I'm not lying. Remember the time I was in Damascus and the governor of King Aretas posted guards at the city gates to arrest me? I crawled through a window in the wall, was let down in a basket, and had to run for my life.

## think

- What goes through your mind when you read the apostle Paul's description of his life?
- Do you ever play "My impossible schedule is worse than yours" with your friends or family? Why do you suppose some of us tend to brag about our stressed-out lives?
- Among many other trials, Paul mentions hard work, hard travel, struggles with friends and foes, betrayals by those close

to him, and anxiety for others. Describe your experiences with any of these.

- What does Paul's account of his life motivate you to do? Work harder? Thank God that your life isn't so bad? Feel guilty? Why do you suppose that's the case?
- What do you think about Paul's determination to "brag about the humiliations that make [him] like Jesus"?

pray

Lord, thank you . . .

## LIVE

### what i want to discuss

What have you discovered this week that you definitely want to discuss with your small group? Write that here. Then begin your small-group discussion with these thoughts.

### so what?

Use the following space to summarize the truths you uncovered about your schedule, how you feel about it, and where you need to begin in dealing with your situation. Review your “Beginning Place” if you need to remember where you began. How does God’s truth affect the next step in your journey?

### now what?

What is one practical thing you can do to respond to what you discovered? What concrete action can you take? Remember to think realistically—an admirable but unreachable goal is as good as no goal. Discuss your goal in your small group to further define it.

### how?

How can your group—or even one other person—help you follow through with the goal you described? What support do you need? (Sure, you’re Superwoman, but . . .) How will you measure the success of your plan? Write the details here.

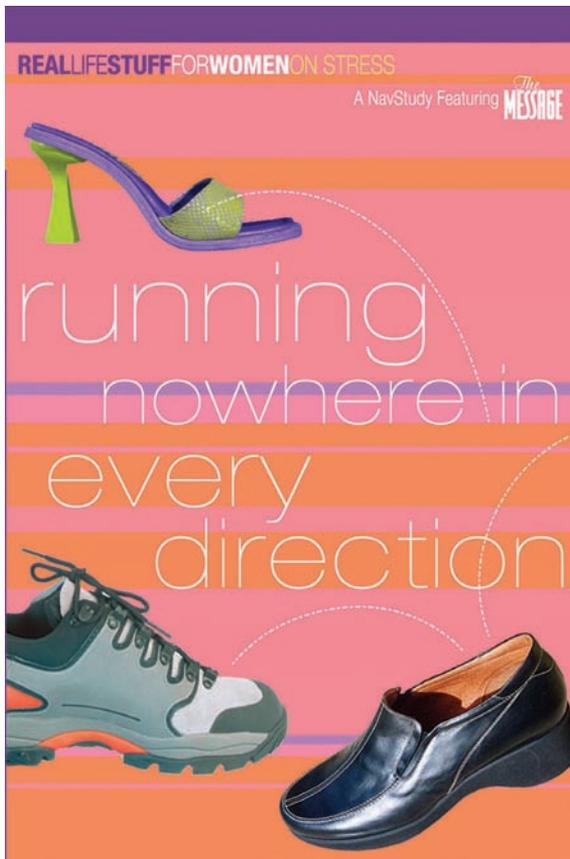
lesson 1

1. Jill Eggleton Brett, "Not Tonight, Dear . . ." *Today's Christian Woman*, March/April 2002, p. 68.
2. Lauren Weisberger, *The Devil Wears Prada: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pp. 65-66.
3. Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 33-35.

# Expectations

## LESSON TWO

From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# expectations

## a reminder:

*Before you dive into this study, spend a little time reviewing what you wrote in the previous lesson's "Live" section. How are you doing? Check with your small-group members and review your progress toward your goals. If necessary, adjust your goals and plans, and then recommit to them.*

## the beginning place

Why do we live like this, constantly on the run? Do we feel better on six hours of sleep than on eight? Does food taste better in the car? Does a relaxing evening with friends seem dull?

Certainly some of us enjoy the adrenaline rush of speed and deadlines. But a lot of us don't. Instead, we're driven not by the pleasure of the chase but by expectations. Our children have needs and wants. Our bosses expect a certain level of productivity. The other women at church; the other mothers at our children's schools; our husbands, boyfriends, and female friends—they all look to us for something, and we really don't want to let them down. On top of that, we have our own dreams and standards.

Take a few minutes to list some of the people in your life and a few of the things they expect from you. Then add yourself, and write down what you expect from yourself. Read your list. What goes through your mind as you read it? "No problem!" or "I can't face this"?

## read mothers who make the effort

From *I Don't Know How She Does It*, by Allison Pearson<sup>1</sup>

Homemade is what I'm after here. Home is where the heart is. Home is where the good mother is, baking for her children.

All this trouble because of a letter Emily brought back from school ten days ago, now stuck on the fridge with a Tinky Winky magnet, asking if “parents could please make a voluntary contribution of appropriate festive refreshments” for the Christmas party they always put on after the carols. The note is printed in berry red and at the bottom, next to Miss Empson’s signature, there is a snowman wearing a mortarboard and a shy grin. But do not be deceived by the strenuous tone of informality or the outbreak of chummy exclamation marks!!! Oh, no. Notes from school are written in code. . . . Take that word “parents,” for example. When they write “parents” what they really mean, what they still mean, is “mothers.” (Has a father who has a wife on the premises ever read a note from school? Technically, it’s not impossible, I suppose, but the note will have been a party invitation and, furthermore, it will have been an invitation to a party that has taken place at least ten days earlier.) And “voluntary”? Voluntary is teacher-speak for “On pain of death and/or your child failing to gain a place at the senior school of your choice.” As for “appropriate festive refreshments,” these are definitely not something bought by a lazy cheat in a supermarket.

How do I know that? Because I still recall the look my own mother exchanged with Mrs. Frieda Davies in 1974. . . . “You see, Katharine,” Mrs. Davies explained later, doing that disapproving upsneeze thing with her sinuses over teacakes, “there are mothers who make an effort like your mum and me. And then you get the type of person who”—prolonged sniff—“don’t make the effort.” . . .

So before I was really old enough to understand what being a woman meant, I already understood that the world of women was divided in two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing

bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the wash-tub, and there were the other sort. At the age of thirty-five, I know precisely which kind I am, and I suppose that's what I'm doing here in the small hours of the thirteenth of December, hitting [store-bought] pies with a rolling pin till they look like something mother-made.

## think

- Do you agree that the world of women is divided in two—those who “make the effort” and those who don't? What makes you say that?
- In your experience, how are mothers (or people in general) who “don't make the effort” treated?
- Do you “make the effort”? If so, how? If not, what do you do and not do?
- How does making the effort (or not doing so) affect your stress level?
- How do you treat women who “don't make the effort”?

## pray

Lord, show me . . .

**read** a good woman is hard to find

**Proverbs 31:10-31**

A good woman is hard to find,  
and worth far more than diamonds.  
Her husband trusts her without reserve,  
and never has reason to regret it.  
Never spiteful, she treats him generously  
all her life long.  
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons,  
and enjoys knitting and sewing.  
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places  
and brings back exotic surprises.  
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast  
for her family and organizing her day.  
She looks over a field and buys it,  
then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.  
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work,  
rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.  
She senses the worth of her work,  
is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.  
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth,  
diligent in homemaking.  
She's quick to assist anyone in need,  
reaches out to help the poor.  
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows;  
their winter clothes are all mended and ready to wear.  
She makes her own clothing,  
and dresses in colorful linens and silks.  
Her husband is greatly respected  
when he deliberates with the city fathers.  
She designs gowns and sells them,  
brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.  
Her clothes are well-made and elegant,  
and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.

When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say,  
 and she always says it kindly.  
 She keeps an eye on everyone in her household,  
 and keeps them all busy and productive.  
 Her children respect and bless her;  
 her husband joins in with words of praise:  
 “Many women have done wonderful things,  
 but you’ve outclassed them all!”  
 Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.  
 The woman to be admired and praised  
 is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God.  
 Give her everything she deserves!  
 Festoon her life with praises!

## think

- Proverbs 31 has long been held up as the standard for Christian women. What thoughts and feelings go through your mind when you read this passage?
- What are the character qualities of the Proverbs 31 woman?
- How would you compare your own character qualities, work achievements, and family performance to hers?
- How might a woman misunderstand this passage and apply it in an unhelpful way?
- How do you think God wants you to respond to the standard set by the Proverbs 31 woman?

## pray

Father, I need to know . . .

## read the superwoman syndrome

From the article “Women, Stress and Midlife,” by Jeanne Mackin<sup>2</sup>

Raising perfect kids, working, keeping up a home, caring for aging parents—all while time is running out for dreams and youth. What’s a woman at midlife to do? . . .

It’s not just that so many people expect so much of [women]. It’s that they expect so much of themselves. It’s the superwoman syndrome, and it’s very, very real. . . .

Part of the superwoman syndrome lies in the way women define success, which is different from the male definition, [Elaine] Wethington says. For women, success must include high achievement at home and on the job. Men define success in terms of their jobs; the kids matter—they are very important, in fact—but how well they turn out has more to do with the mother’s work at home than their own.

“Women have this attitude that they have to handle everything and handle it well,” she says. “They have to be tougher than men, work harder, and be morally superior. This generation of women now entering midlife was especially ambitious. They even made parenting a competitive sport. It wasn’t enough to have and raise children. They had to have perfect children.”

## think

- How important to you is high achievement on the job? At home? Why is that the case?
- What would or does high achievement at home look like for you? Are you hitting those standards?
- Do you aim for perfect kids? If so, how do you do that? If not, why not?
- If you don’t have a husband and/or children, do you feel you’re failing to meet expectations in that area? Explain.
- Do you know parents who treat parenting as a competitive sport? If so, how does that affect their families? How does it affect you?

**think** (continued)

**pray**

God, I want to put in your hands . . .

## read thirteen men to feed

Luke 10:38-42

As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. “Master, don’t you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand.”

The Master said, “Martha, dear Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it’s the main course, and won’t be taken from her.”

## think

- What were Martha’s expectations of herself? Of Mary? What did Jesus want?
- When you put Proverbs 31 side by side with this passage, what picture do you get of God’s desires for you?
- Are you more like Martha or Mary?
- In a given week, how much time do you devote to cultivating a personal connection with Jesus? Why is that?

## pray

Jesus, please strengthen me to . . .

read professional jugglers

From the *Los Angeles Times* article “We’re All Multi-tasking, but What’s the Cost?” by Melissa Healy<sup>3</sup>

Multi-tasking, for most Americans, has become a way of life. Doing many things at once is the way we manage demands bearing down on us at warp speed, tame a plague of helpful technological devices and play enough roles—parent, coach, social secretary, executive—to stage a Broadway show.

But researchers peering into the brains of those engaged in several tasks at once are concluding what some overworked Americans had begun to suspect: that multi-tasking, which many have embraced as the key to success, is instead a formula for shoddy work, mismanaged time, rote solutions, stress and forgetfulness. Not to mention car crashes, kitchen fires, forgotten children, near misses in the skies and other dangers of inattention.

So turn off the music, hang up the phone, pull over to the side of the road and take note: When it comes to using your brain to conduct several tasks at one time, “there is no free lunch,” says University of Michigan psychologist David E. Meyer. For all but the most routine tasks—and few mental undertakings are truly routine—it will take more time for the brain to switch among tasks than it would have to complete one and then turn to the other.

When the two get squished together, each will be short-changed, resulting in errors.

And a prolonged jag of extreme multi-tasking, warns Meyer, may lead to a shorter attention span, poorer judgment and impaired memory. . . .

Indeed, complaints of forgetfulness among women in their 40s and 50s are so prevalent that Peter M. Meyer, a biostatistician at Chicago’s Rush University Medical Center, in the late 1990s conducted a study intended to gauge how deeply the hormone changes of menopause disrupt women’s memory.

Instead, he got a lesson on women and multi-tasking. The

tests of short-term memory and verbal memory stubbornly showed that women of this age, though they complained of forgetfulness, were not missing a step. Their forgetfulness appeared to be a function of depression, stress and “role overload”—the multi-tasking of many roles at once—Meyer concluded.

## think

- What tasks do you often try to do simultaneously?
- How does doing several things at once affect your performance or memory, if at all?
- Brain researchers say it takes “more time for the brain to switch among tasks than it would have to complete one and then turn to the other.” How do you respond to that claim?
- If the research is right, then why do we try to do several things at once?

## pray

Father, these tasks I'm juggling . . .

## read unforced rhythms

Matthew 11:28-30

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

## think

- What does your church expect of “good Christians”? Of you personally?
- What do you think “the unforced rhythms of grace” means?
- From this passage, what does Jesus seem to expect or want from you?
- Jesus says, “Watch how I do it.” How would a person go about watching how Jesus does life?
- How do you respond emotionally to Jesus’ words here?

## pray

Jesus, teach me . . .

## LIVE

what i want to discuss

What have you discovered this week that you definitely want to discuss with your small group? Write that here. Then begin your small-group discussion with these thoughts.

so what?

Use the following space to summarize the truths you uncovered about the expectations you live with, how you feel about them, and where you need to begin in dealing with your situation. Review your “Beginning Place” if you need to remember where you began. How does God’s truth affect the next step in your journey?

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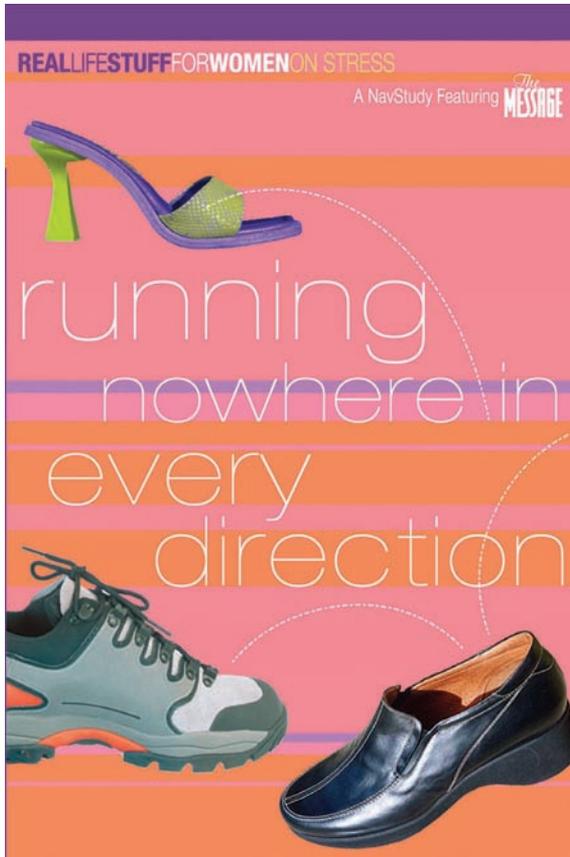
lesson 2

1. Allison Pearson, *I Don't Know How She Does It: The Life of Kate Reddy, Working Mother* (New York: Knopf, 2002), pp. 3-4.
2. Jeanne Mackin, "Women, Stress and Midlife," *Human Ecology Forum*, New York State College of Human Ecology, September 1, 1995.
3. Melissa Healy, "We're All Multi-tasking, but What's the Cost?" *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2004.

# Limits

## LESSON THREE

From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# limits

## a reminder:

*Before you dive into this study, spend a little time reviewing what you wrote in the previous lesson's "Live" section. How are you doing? Check with your small-group members and review your progress toward your goals. If necessary, adjust your goals and plans, and then recommit to them.*

## the beginning place

Some of us are profoundly aware of our limits. We notice we just don't have the stamina we did when we were younger. Or perhaps we have a physical disability. Others of us exult in pushing past the supposed limits to our achievement. We know we're bright and full of energy, and the world is our dance floor.

As you begin this lesson, pause to reflect on your limits. First, how do you feel about the suggestion that you have limits? Does something inside you say, *Yes, thank you for validating what I've known!* Or does your gut protest, *Why are you being so negative? I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!*

What limits are you aware of? Think about physical, emotional, financial, mental, and spiritual limits, or any others that occur to you. How do you feel about your limits? If the whole idea of limits seems foolish and unhelpful to you, say so.

## read overload

From *Margin*, by Richard A. Swenson, M.D.<sup>1</sup>

Overloading is a phenomenon of limits. “Researchers,” according to sociologist Alvin Toffler, “strongly agree on two basic principles: first, that man has limited capacity; and second, that overloading the system leads to serious breakdown of performance.”<sup>2</sup> . . .

Performance limits are related to physical limits but also introduce the factor of will. The endpoint is not as objectively defined, and we often are not quite as willing to accept the fact that there are limits. This is where stress fractures come from—people want to push themselves beyond the limit of breakdown. . . .

Our performance increases with increasing demand and increasing effort—but only up to a point. Once we reach our limits, fatigue sets in, followed quickly by exhaustion and collapse.

Emotional limits are even more vague. How much straining can the psyche withstand before being overloaded? . . . You might be able to emotionally “carry” one person. But what about five? Ten? One hundred? Where should we draw the line? . . .

Mental limits are as difficult to define as emotional limits, but the existence of such limits is indisputable. Information overload soon results in mental short-circuiting. . . .

Some will respond: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”<sup>3</sup> Does this mean you can fly? Can you go six months without eating? Neither can you live a healthy life chronically overloaded. God did not intend this verse to represent a negation of life-balance. Even Jesus Himself did not heal every case of leprosy in Israel. Think about it.

It is God the Creator who made limits, and it is the same God who placed them within us for our protection. We exceed them at our peril.

## Philippians 4:13

Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.

## think

- What do you think about the idea that God the Creator made our limits and “placed them within us for our protection”?
- Which physical limits, if any, are most frustrating for you? Why is that?
- To what degree can you relate to the idea of “exhaustion and collapse”?
- Do you experience information overload at work, in the news, or from other sources? If so, describe your experience.
- Dr. Swenson addresses Philippians 4:13, which the NIV translates as “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” Compare the way *The Message* renders that verse. When the writer (the apostle Paul) says, “I can make it through anything,” do you think he’s rejecting the idea of limits? Why do you think that?

## pray

Lord, please help me decide . . .

## read isn't weakness great?

### 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

My grace is enough; it's all you need.

My strength comes into its own in your weakness.

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

## think

- How can a handicap be a gift?
- Have you experienced God's strength "com[ing] into its own in your weakness"? If so, how?
- Paul walked thousands of miles to plant churches from the Middle East to Europe. God gave Paul the grace to accomplish all he did despite his limitations. Does that mean we should ignore our limitations and trust God for the grace to do all that our world expects of us? Explain your view.
- What do you think of Paul's attitude toward "limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks"? Typically, what is your attitude toward such things?
- What does it look like, in practice, to "just let Christ take over"?

**think** (continued)

**pray**

Lord, I need your grace for . . .

## read i don't feel so good

From the *National Women's Health Report* article "Women, Chronic Stress & Resilience"<sup>4</sup>

Two types of stress—acute episodic and chronic—are responsible for much of the physical and emotional damage stress causes. In fact, 43 percent of adults suffer adverse health effects from stress, according to the American Psychological Association. . . .

In a four-year study of over 21,000 nurses published in the *British Medical Journal*, Harvard researchers concluded that job stress can sap a woman's health just as surely as smoking or a sedentary lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> . . .

Stress affects every physiological system in the human body, from the top of your head (if you're not pulling your hair out because of stress, it can make your hair fall out), to the tips of your toes. Stress can exacerbate diabetes or other blood sugar disorders, making complications like nerve damage more likely.<sup>6</sup> And numerous controlled studies suggest other harmful effects of chronic stress. For example, it is well-documented that disproportionately high rates of heart disease among older African-American women are associated with chronic stress related to environmental and psychosocial factors.<sup>7</sup> In Japan, researchers who studied 8,656 women who reported high mental stress found that highly stressed women were 2.24 times more likely to suffer strokes than women reporting low stress, and had a coronary disease risk 2.28 times higher than normal, while their overall chance of dying from heart disease was 1.64 times greater than average.<sup>8</sup>

From the *Harper's Bazaar* article "Are You Sleeping?" by Steve Fishman<sup>9</sup>

We're engaged in what amounts to a national sleep-deprivation experiment. . . . [Sleep researcher Eve Van Cauter] has recruited [Fabiola] Rivas—and 50 others—for the largest study of its kind ever. After six days of six-to-seven-hour nights—no naps permitted—Rivas comes into the lab for blood tests that are designed

to reveal how well her sleep-deprived hormones are functioning. The preliminary results, not yet published in a scientific journal, are frightening. “Her metabolism just isn’t as effective,” reports one of the researchers in the study. What Van Cauter is poised to announce is that short sleepers like Rivas may be on the road to hypertension, weight gain, diabetes, even premature aging.

## think

- How does it affect you to know that too much stress increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and other illnesses?
- “Acute episodic” stress means experiencing the same kind of stressful episode over and over. For instance, you might have to drive through heavy traffic day after day, or you might face crisis after crisis at work. What repeated stressors do you experience?
- “Chronic” stress is a constant condition, such as a job you hate, a relationship in turmoil, or money problems. What sources of chronic stress do you experience?
- Are there stressors in your life that you’ve asked God to take away? What has happened, and how do you feel about that?
- Are there stressors in your life that you think God wants you to do something about? If so, what are they?

## pray

Father, please free me from . . .

## read jesus' schedule

### Mark 1:32-45

That evening, after the sun was down, they brought sick and evil-afflicted people to him, the whole city lined up at his door! He cured their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Because the demons knew his true identity, he didn't let them say a word.

While it was still night, way before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, "Everybody's looking for you."

Jesus said, "Let's go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I've come." He went to their meeting places all through Galilee, preaching and throwing out the demons.

A leper came to him, begging on his knees, "If you want to, you can cleanse me."

Deeply moved, Jesus put out his hand, touched him, and said, "I want to. Be clean." Then and there the leprosy was gone, his skin smooth and healthy. Jesus dismissed him with strict orders: "Say nothing to anyone. Take the offering for cleansing that Moses prescribed and present yourself to the priest. This will validate your healing to the people." But as soon as the man was out of earshot, he told everyone he met what had happened, spreading the news all over town. So Jesus kept to out-of-the-way places, no longer able to move freely in and out of the city. But people found him, and came from all over.

## think

- How did Jesus deal with the constant demands on him?
- Healing a leper was considered especially difficult, and when news of it got around, Jesus became a celebrity. How did his celebrity status affect his ability to do his ministry?
- Do you like being in demand? Please explain.
- Did Jesus deal with limits during his earthly life? If so, how? If

not, why not?

- In the Mark passage, what ways does Jesus set an example for you to follow?

pray

Jesus, if you were in my shoes . . .

## read a quiet heart

### Psalm 131

God, I'm not trying to rule the roost,  
I don't want to be king of the mountain.  
I haven't meddled where I have no business  
or fantasized grandiose plans.

I've kept my feet on the ground,  
I've cultivated a quiet heart.  
Like a baby content in its mother's arms,  
my soul is a baby content.

Wait, Israel, for God. Wait with hope.  
Hope now; hope always!

## think

- Does Psalm 131 warn us against dreaming big dreams and passionately pursuing goals? What makes you say that?
- Do you ever meddle where you have no business? If so, what situations tempt you to meddle?
- What does “a quiet heart” mean?
- What relevance does this psalm have to your life?

## pray

God, my soul is . . .

# LIVE

what i want to discuss

What have you discovered this week that you definitely want to discuss with your small group? Write that here. Then begin your small-group discussion with these thoughts.

so what?

Use the following space to summarize the truths you uncovered about limits, how you feel about them, and where you need to begin in dealing with your situation. Review your “Beginning Place” if you need to remember where you began. How does God’s truth affect the next step in your journey?

now what?

What is one practical thing you can do to respond to what you discovered? What concrete action can you take? Remember to think realistically—an admirable but unreachable goal is as good as no goal. Discuss your goal in your small group to further define it.

how?

How can your group—or even one other person—help you follow through with the goal you described? What support do you need? How will you measure the success of your plan? Write the details here.

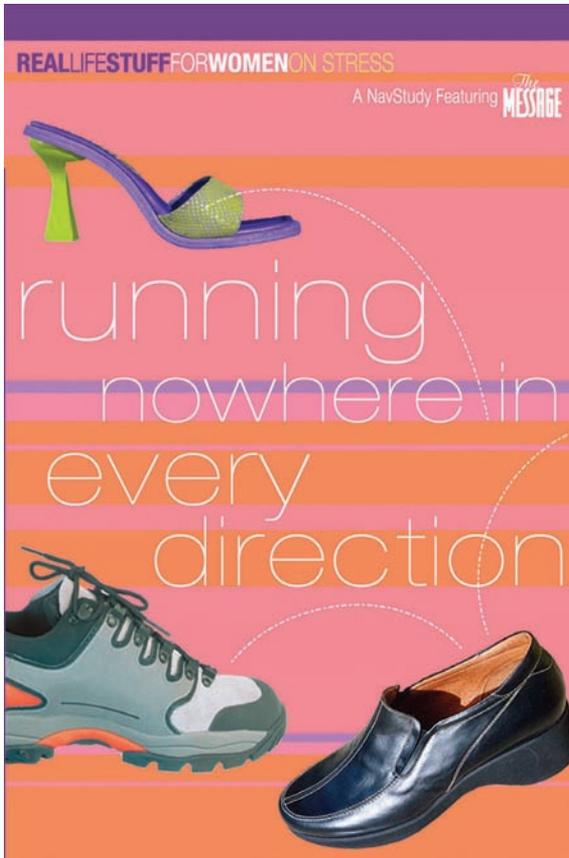
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# Perfection

## LESSON FOUR

From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# perfection

## a reminder:

*Before you dive into this study, spend a little time reviewing what you wrote in the previous lesson's "Live" section. How are you doing? Check with your small-group members and review your progress toward your goals. If necessary, adjust your goals and plans, and then recommit to them.*

## the beginning place

Human limits are fine for those of us who don't mind getting a B on the great Report Card of Life. But when human limits bump up against an expectation that we should be A+ performers, stress is inevitable.

Take a few minutes to roll the word *perfect* around in your mind. What feelings and images does it raise? Anger? Humiliation? Pride? Worry? Laughter?

Do you feel pressure to be perfect? If so, do you feel it in just a few areas of your life or in all areas? Also, if you feel the pressure, where would you say it comes from? Do you believe God expects you to be perfect? After all, Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48, niv). Are there people in your life right now—such as your husband, your boss, or your mother—who demand perfection? Does the voice of perfection echo from someone in your childhood, or has it always been you yourself who set the stratospheric standards?

## read what must i do?

### Matthew 19:16-22

Another day, a man stopped Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

Jesus said, “Why do you question me about what’s good? *God* is the One who is good. If you want to enter the life of God, just do what he tells you.”

The man asked, “What in particular?”

Jesus said, “Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you do yourself.”

The young man said, “I’ve done all that. What’s left?”

“If you want to give it all you’ve got,” Jesus replied, “go sell your possessions; give everything to the poor. All your wealth will then be in heaven. Then come follow me.”

That was the last thing the young man expected to hear. And so, crestfallen, he walked away. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and he couldn’t bear to let go.

## think

- How do you respond to Jesus’ statement, “If you want to enter the life of God, just do what he tells you”?
- The man in this story isn’t satisfied with keeping most of the Ten Commandments and loving his neighbor. He knows the bar is set higher. To what extent are you like that?
- Jesus speaks of “giv[ing] it all you’ve got.” Are you a person who tries to give it all you’ve got? If so, what motivates that attitude in you?
- Why was the young man crestfallen? Would you have been crestfallen in his shoes? Explain.

**think** (continued)

**pray**

Jesus, what do you want from me? Is it . . .

## read who says you have to?

From the *Cosmopolitan* article “The Pain of Being ‘Perfect,’”

by Kelly James-Enger<sup>1</sup>

Asking yourself the following questions can help you read your inner-critic meter: Do you miss deadlines fine-tuning a “rush” project? Can you recall all of your past mistakes but few of your successes? Do you scrutinize what you say and how you look?

Kathy, 26, a book editor in New York, admits she’s so critical about her appearance that she won’t even accept when she does look great. “There’s no way I’m setting foot out the door without having just the right outfit,” she says. “I change in and out of countless shirts, skirts, pants, and sweaters, inspecting each combination in the mirror. Sometimes my roommate has to drive me out of the house so I’m not late for work. She says I look fine, but no matter how many people tell me they love my outfit, in my opinion it’ll never, ever be good enough.” . . .

Luckily, die-hard do-it-righters can overcome their fear of screwing up, first by questioning their own unrealistic expectations. Who says you have to weigh 120 pounds? Who says you can never make a mistake at work? “Perfectionists are often surprised to find that others don’t share their high standards,” says [Monica Ramirez] Basco<sup>2</sup>. . . .

And if small tasks take eons to accomplish because you’re so busy double-checking yourself, set some deadlines. Susan, 23, who is in ad sales, used to record her voice-mail greeting over and over trying to get the tone and inflection just right. “Now I limit myself to five tries,” she says. “Although I’m usually not happy with the final result, I also realize that the hundredth probably won’t satisfy me, either, and that the time I’d expend on it isn’t worth it.”

From the *Newsday* sidebar “Just How Perfect or Imperfect Are You?”  
by Joanne Kabak<sup>3</sup>

Are you a perfectionist? Lorrie Lafferty, co-author of “Perfectionism: A Sure Cure for Happiness,” [Human Synergetics, 1996] identifies some characteristics. Read these and see if you recognize yourself:

- *Expression of superiority over others.* This actually serves to hide the perfectionist’s lack of self-worth and is a way to keep others at a distance.
- *Constant irritation over trivial things.* Poor service or standing in line feels like an insult to a perfectionist’s self-importance and leads to inordinate upset.
- *A debilitating fear of failure* that sees failure lurking everywhere and is both physically and emotionally taxing.
- *Inability to relax.* You have to keep going; otherwise your life is mediocre and worthless.
- *A feeling that any failure is total humiliation.* Everything is at stake all of the time.
- *Inability to accept anything just the way it is.* There is no pleasure in even momentary achievement. There’s only the next hurdle to conquer.

Are you imperfect? Don’t deny it; flaunt it. You’re just affirming your humanity and your desire to grow, said Enid Howarth and Jan Tras, authors of “The Joy of Imperfection” [Fairview Press]. Here are a few examples of what you can tell yourself to enjoy who you are:

- I was an imperfect child in an imperfect family. Now I’m an imperfect adult.
- I am already rich enough and thin enough.
- I can lose without being a loser.
- I never need to criticize myself.

- I can make a decision, learn from it, change my mind, make a new decision.
- I am worthy, lovable, smart, cute and entirely imperfect.
- I have fabulous flaws.

## think

- Which, if any, of the list of perfectionist traits do you see in yourself?
- List a few of your mistakes from the past year. Then list at least six successes.
- If you lowered your standards, what consequences would you expect?
- How do you see perfectionism influencing the way you treat your work? Your family? Your church involvement?
- What do you think about the affirmations (“I was an imperfect child,” and so on)? Which ones, if any, are hard for you to say?

## pray

Lord, I have to admit . . .

**read** how to be truly perfect

Matthew 5:48 (NIV)

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

From *Amazing Grace*, by Kathleen Norris<sup>4</sup>

Perfectionism is one of the scariest words I know. It is a marked characteristic of contemporary American culture, a serious psychological affliction that makes people too timid to take necessary risks and causes them to suffer when, although they’ve done the best they can, their efforts fall short of some imaginary, and usually unattainable, standard. Internally, it functions as a form of myopia, a preoccupation with self-image that can stunt emotional growth.

Martha Stewart might be seen as the high priestess of Perfection: one dare not let the mask slip, even in one’s home, where all is perfect, right down to the last hand-stenciled napkin ring.

I had never before thought to compare Jesus Christ to Martha Stewart and am fortunate that the gospels themselves can rescue me from any predicament.

The good news about the word “perfect” as used in the New Testament is that it is not a scary word so much as a scary translation. The word that has been translated as “perfect” does not mean to set forth an impossible goal, or the perfectionism that would have me strive for it at any cost. It is taken from a Latin word meaning complete, entire, full-grown. To those who originally heard it, the word would convey “mature” rather than what we mean today by “perfect.”

To “be perfect,” in the sense that Jesus means it, is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness. To mature is to lose adolescent self-consciousness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself, as a parent, as teacher, friend, spouse.

## think

- Are you surprised by this definition of biblical perfection? Why or why not?
- Do you think you're preoccupied with self-image? How can you tell?
- Do you see yourself as a gift to others? If not, why not?
- Assess your standards for yourself in light of this reading. Did you find that you're too hard on yourself?
- Do you feel pressure to mature? If so, where does that pressure come from?

## pray

Lord, I really want to be able to . . .

## read grow up

Matthew 5:43-48

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

“In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

## think

- The second paragraph above renders the verse translated as “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (NIV). What does it tell you about what God means by “perfect”?
- The first paragraph describes one of the ways a grown-up kingdom subject thinks and lives. Why do you suppose loving our enemies is a sign of maturity?
- How is this standard of maturity like or unlike the standards you typically try to meet? How is this like or unlike the kind of maturity you try to foster in your children?
- If living generously and graciously were your standard, how would that affect your schedule?
- How would you evaluate your career goals in light of what you’ve learned so far in this study? What about your financial goals?

60 running nowhere in every direction

think (continued)

pray

Jesus, please help me . . .

**REALLIFESTUFFFORWOMEN**

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## read no fear

### 1 John 4:16-19

God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.

## think

- What's the connection between perfectionism and fear?
- How does maturity in love counteract fear?
- How convinced are you that God loves, likes, enjoys, and cherishes you?
- If it's hard for you to have a settled conviction that you're loved, what do you think gets in the way?
- If you wanted to overcome perfectionism, where do you think you would start?

## pray

God, you love me . . .

## LIVE

### what i want to discuss

What have you discovered this week that you definitely want to discuss with your small group? Write that here. Then begin your small-group discussion with these thoughts.

### so what?

Use the following space to summarize the truths you uncovered about perfection or maturity, how you feel about them, and where you need to begin in dealing with your situation. Review your “Beginning Place” if you need to remember where you began. How does God’s truth affect the next step in your journey?

### now what?

What is one practical thing you can do to respond to what you discovered? What concrete action can you take? Remember to think realistically—an admirable but unreachable goal is as good as no goal. Discuss your goal in your small group to further define it.

### how?

How can your group—or even one other person—help you follow through with the goal you described? What support do you need? How will you measure the success of your plan? Write the details here.

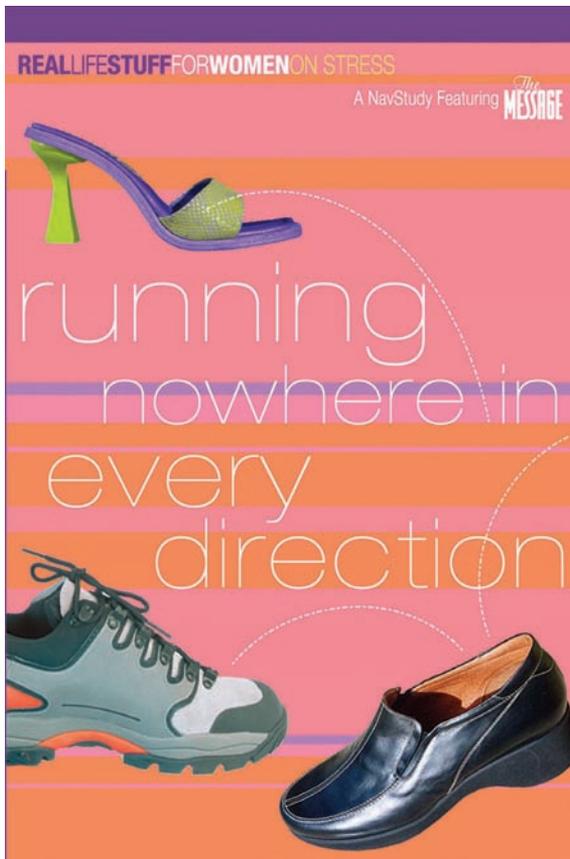
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# Fruitfulness

## LESSON FIVE

From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# fruitfulness

## a reminder:

*Before you dive into this study, spend a little time reviewing what you wrote in the previous lesson's "Live" section. How are you doing? Check with your small-group members and review your progress toward your goals. If necessary, adjust your goals and plans, and then recommit to them.*

## the beginning place

Our culture adores productivity. Statistics on worker productivity make news. We teach high school students about the gross national product. We flock to any technology that enables us to produce more in less time. We multitask—despite the risk of accidents—because we feel driven to get more done.

And productivity isn't important only in offices and factories. We don't feel good about ourselves at home if we're not checking off enough items on our to-do list. Laundry, dishes, shopping, home improvement projects—look how much we've accomplished! But it's never enough. Sadly, one of our great fears as we age or suffer health problems is that we'll become useless.

The Bible, however, talks about fruitfulness. What's that? Is it the same as productivity? It seems that way; after all, *produce* is a synonym for *fruits and vegetables*.

As you begin this lesson, reflect on the word *productive*. What feelings and images come to mind? Do you see yourself as productive?

How important is it to you that you be productive?

Then reflect on the word *fruitful*. What feelings and images does that raise for you? Do you think of yourself as a fruitful person? What are your dreams of a fruitful life? How does that compare to the reality you see in your life?

## read the pressure to produce

From the *Fast Company* article “Balance is Bunk!” by Keith H. Hammonds<sup>1</sup>

Pavan Vishwakarma is a 25-year-old freelance Web and e-commerce software developer. He lives and works in Bhopal, India, but he has done work for companies in Illinois, Nevada, and Canada. And he has, as he advertises, “no working hours limitation. I can work up to any stretch of time.”

You want balance? He doesn’t, particularly. He wants to work, and he’ll work cheap—a lot cheaper than you will.

The global economy is anti-balance. For as much as Accenture and Google say they value an environment that allows workers balance, they’re increasingly competing against companies that don’t. You’re competing against workers with a lot more to gain than you, who will work harder for less money to get the job done. This is the dark side of the “happy workaholic.” Someday, all of us will have to become workaholics, happy or not, just to get by.

## think

- How do you respond emotionally to this reading?
- What do you think of the ideas presented? To what extent do you buy the argument? Explain.
- If you work outside the home, what messages do you get from your employer and coworkers about productivity?
- How important is it to you to be productive in your home life? What does productivity mean in that setting?
- Is the idea of productivity relevant at church? If so, how? If not, why not?

think (continued)

pray

Lord, when I think about being productive . . .

## read make your home in me

John 15:1-8

“I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn’t bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.

“Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

“I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.”

## think

- According to this passage, what does it take to be fruitful (or “produce grapes”) from Jesus’ point of view?
- What do you think it means to “make your home in” Jesus?
- How is Jesus’ idea of fruitfulness like or unlike the productivity implied in the *Fast Company* article in the previous “Read” section?
- From Jesus’ point of view, how fruitful are you? What makes you say that?
- How much energy do you devote to being fruitful in this way?

think (continued)

pray

Jesus, I want to make my home in you . . .

read productive versus fruitful

From *Lifesigns*, by Henri Nouwen<sup>2</sup>

Here we have to make an important distinction between fruits and products. A call to live a fruitful life does not necessarily imply a call to be productive. A product is something we make. Certain concrete actions lead to a product that we can subsequently claim as our own. When we repeat these actions, the result is the same product, and if we repeat these actions over and over, we are soon considered very productive persons who do not waste their time.

In our world, everything can become a product: not only cars, houses, books, and artifacts, but also influential friends, successful interactions, and important decisions. . . . In our contemporary society, with its emphasis on accomplishment and success, we often live as if being productive is the same as being fruitful. . . . But if we want to live as followers of Jesus, we must come to know that products, successes, and results often belong more to the house of fear than to the house of love. . . .

This emphasis on productivity has also deeply affected our interpersonal relationships. Relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, teachers and students are often poisoned by an all-pervasive concern for success. . . .

I do not want to suggest that productivity is wrong or needs to be despised. On the contrary, productivity and success can greatly enhance our lives. But when our value as human beings depends on what we make with our hands and minds, we become victims of the fear tactics of our world. When productivity is our main way of overcoming self-doubt, we are extremely vulnerable to rejection and criticism and prone to inner anxiety and depression. Productivity can never give the deep sense of belonging we crave. The more we produce, the more we realize that successes and results cannot give us the experience of “at homeness.” . . .

Fruits can only come forth from the ground of intimate love. They are not made, nor are they the result of specific human actions that can be repeated. Neither predictable nor definable, fruits are gifts to be received. It is precisely this quality of gift that distinguishes fruits from products.

## think

- According to Nouwen, how is fruitfulness different from productivity? Do you find his distinction helpful? What makes you say that?
- Nouwen contrasts life in “the house of fear” with life in “the house of love.” From what you read in 1 John 4:16-19 (lesson 4), what do you think it means to live in the house of fear?
- What connection do you see between making your home in Jesus (see previous reading, John 15) and living in “the house of love”?
- Why does intimate love lead to fruitfulness? Why does fear hinder fruitfulness?
- To what extent is your daily activity motivated by fear? To what extent is it motivated by love?

## pray

Father, I really really want . . .

## read reckless lover

John 12:23-28

Jesus answered, “Time’s up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

“Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

“If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you’ll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment’s notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me.

“Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? ‘Father, get me out of this?’ No, this is why I came in the first place. I’ll say, ‘Father, put your glory on display.’”

A voice came out of the sky: “I have glorified it, and I’ll glorify it again.”

## think

- In the second paragraph of the John 12 passage, Jesus explains why he had to die in order for his life to be truly fruitful. What’s his explanation?
- How does the “grain of wheat” metaphor apply to us?
- Why do people hold on to their lives instead of letting them go?
- What would it look like for you to let go of your life, reckless in love?
- How, if at all, is this passage relevant to the way you deal with your job or career? With your home life? Your church involvement?

72 running nowhere in every direction

think (continued)

pray

Father, letting go . . .

**REALLIFESTUFFFORWOMEN**

From Running Nowhere in Every Direction/ISBN 978-1-57683-836-5

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## read bumper crop

Matthew 13:3-9,18-23

Using the boat as a pulpit, [Jesus] addressed his congregation, telling stories.

“What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn’t put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.

“Are you listening to this? Really listening?” . . .

“Study this story of the farmer planting seed. When anyone hears news of the kingdom and doesn’t take it in, it just remains on the surface, and so the Evil One comes along and plucks it right out of that person’s heart. This is the seed the farmer scatters on the road.

“The seed cast in the gravel—this is the person who hears and instantly responds with enthusiasm. But there is no soil of character, and so when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it.

“The seed cast in the weeds is the person who hears the kingdom news, but weeds of worry and illusions about getting more and wanting everything under the sun strangle what was heard, and nothing comes of it.

“The seed cast on good earth is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.”

## think

- What is the “harvest beyond [our] wildest dreams” that Jesus wants our lives to produce?
- How does this kind of productivity or fruitfulness compare to what has been described in earlier readings?

- In this story, what qualities in a person hinder fruitfulness? To what extent do you see those qualities in yourself? What can you do about that?
- If productivity or fruitfulness means one thing to Jesus and another thing in our modern economy, how do we reconcile those differences?

pray

Jesus, I'm really listening, and I'm hearing you say . . .

## read hurry versus love

From *The Life You've Always Wanted*, by John Ortberg<sup>3</sup>

Hurried people cannot love. Lewis Grant suggests that we are afflicted with what he calls “sunset fatigue.” When we come home at the end of a day’s work, those who need our love the most, those to whom we are most committed, end up getting the leftovers. Sunset fatigue is when we are just too tired, or too drained, or too preoccupied to love the people to whom we have made the deepest promises. Sunset fatigue has set in, Grant says, when:

- you find yourself rushing even when there’s no reason to;
- there is an underlying tension that causes sharp words or sibling quarrels;
- you set up mock races (“OK, kids, let’s see who can take a bath fastest”) that are really about your own need to get through it;
- you sense a loss of gratitude and wonder;
- you indulge in self-destructive escapes from fatigue: abusing alcohol, watching too much TV, listening to country-western music [okay, the last one is mine, not Grant’s].

It is because it kills love that hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life. Hurry lies behind much of the anger and frustration of modern life. Hurry prevents us from receiving love from the Father or giving it to His children. That’s why Jesus never hurried. If we are to follow Jesus, we must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives—because, by definition, we can’t move faster than the one we are following.

We can do this: we can become unhurried people. We can become patient people.

## think

- Which, if any, of the “sunset fatigue” behaviors do you exhibit?
- How and why does hurry kill love?
- What does that say about the effect of hurry on fruitfulness?
- Realistically, how can you “ruthlessly eliminate hurry” from your life?

## pray

Lord, I need your help to . . .

# LIVE

## what i want to discuss

What have you discovered this week that you definitely want to discuss with your small group? Write that here. Then begin your small-group discussion with these thoughts.

## so what?

Use the following space to summarize the truths you uncovered about productivity and fruitfulness, how you feel about them, and where you need to begin in dealing with your situation. Review your “Beginning Place” if you need to remember where you began. How does God’s truth affect the next step in your journey?

## now what?

What is one practical thing you can do to respond to what you discovered? What concrete action can you take? Remember to think realistically—an admirable but unreachable goal is as good as no goal. Discuss your goal in your small group to further define it.

## how?

How can your group—or even one other person—help you follow through with the goal you described? What support do you need? How will you measure the success of your plan? Write the details here.

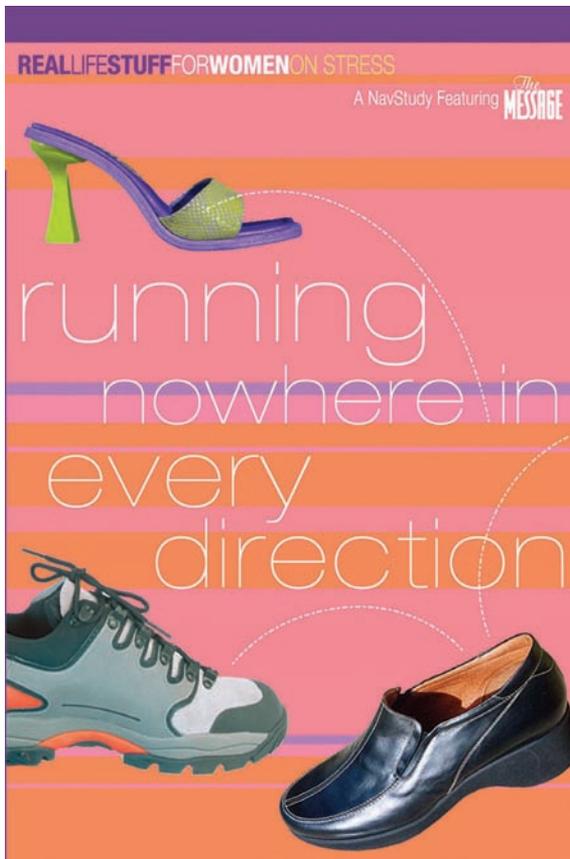
lesson 5

1. Keith H. Hammonds, "Balance is Bunk!" *Fast Company*, October 2004, p. 72. © 2004 Gruner & Jahr USA Publishing. First published in *Fast Company* magazine. Reprinted with permission.
2. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), pp. 60-71.
3. John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 87-88.

# Trust

## LESSON SIX

### From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# trust

## a reminder:

*Before you dive into this study, spend a little time reviewing what you wrote in the previous lesson's "Live" section. How are you doing? Check with your small-group members and review your progress toward your goals. If necessary, adjust your goals and plans, and then recommit to them.*

## the beginning place

Living in the house of love would be a lot easier if we knew things wouldn't collapse around us. So many of our fears seem rational: There really are a lot of people overseas (and even elsewhere in our company) who will eagerly take our jobs if we don't produce enough. It really is tough to get kids into college these days. It's hard for a single woman to find a good husband and hard for a married woman to take care of one. Whether we're twenty-five or forty-five, we question what we have to show for our lives. And of course, there's the terrorist wild card to deal with.

If we let go of our lives, reckless in our love as Jesus asks, how do we know that the most important things in our lives won't crumble? If we "ruthlessly eliminate hurry," can God be trusted to take care of us?

A lot boils down to trust. Can we trust God? And exactly what can we trust him to do? For instance, if we can trust him to keep us and our families alive but not to maintain our middle-class lifestyles, then maybe we're not interested. Anybody who has had something go

seriously wrong in life, often despite prayer, has reason to question how reliable God is in the Areas That Really Matter.

As you begin this lesson, reflect on trust. Do you trust God? What do you trust him to do? What don't you trust him to do? What helps you trust him, and what hinders your trust?

## read god-reality

## Matthew 6:25-34

“If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds.

“Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

“If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God’s *giving*. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

“Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.”

## think

- Jesus says that “there is far more to your life” than food or clothes. What’s more important in your life than food and clothes?
- How convinced are you that God will “attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you”? Why is that?
- How do you respond to the statement, “What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God’s *giving*”?
- How does a person go about steeping her life in “God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions”?

## pray

Jesus, I want to believe that . . .

read yes, but birds don't go to school

From the *Christian Science Monitor* article “Two Incomes, More Debt?” by Marilyn Gardner<sup>1</sup>

[Elizabeth] Warren sees Mom’s paycheck—a family’s second income, the very asset meant to provide more financial stability—as a potential culprit rather than an economic cure. When middle-class mothers began entering the workforce en masse, she explains, their incomes gave parents more money to spend on housing. This created “frenzied bidding wars” for homes in desirable school districts. A deregulated mortgage industry compounded the peril by allowing homeowners to assume larger mortgages.

As a result, Warren says, dual-income families have less discretionary income and are more vulnerable economically than their single-breadwinner counterparts in the past.

She spells out her unusual theories in *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke* (Basic Books), written with her daughter, Amelia Warren Tyagi.

“Two parents working hard at two jobs is not a guarantee against economic disaster,” Warren says in a phone interview. “Today’s parents feel they have no option but to pour enormous energy and all of their economic resources into getting their children into decent schools.”

Problems arise, the authors add, when couples commit both incomes to fixed expenses. “Families aren’t going broke because of one extra pair of Nikes,” says Tyagi, a business consultant. “Families are vulnerable because they’ve stretched the fixed costs they have to pay month in, month out, no matter what. If something goes wrong and you face a period of unemployment, there’s no way to cut back on the mortgage.”

The No. 1 question every two-income couple needs to ask, Warren says, is whether their family can survive without one income. If not, she urges them to create an emergency backup plan as a hedge against the possibility that one of them will lose their income at some point.

## think

- If you're married, can your family survive without your income? Please explain. If you're single, how do current housing prices affect you?
- Besides housing, what other expenses motivate you (and/or your husband) to work longer and harder?
- What would it mean to trust God with this situation?
- If you look at your expenses through the lens of "God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions," what do you observe?

## pray

Lord, my expenses . . .

## read god gives, god takes

### Job 1:8-22

GOD said to Satan, “Have you noticed my friend Job? There’s no one quite like him—honest and true to his word, totally devoted to God and hating evil.”

Satan retorted, “So do you think Job does all that out of the sheer goodness of his heart? Why, no one ever had it so good! You pamper him like a pet, make sure nothing bad ever happens to him or his family or his possessions, bless everything he does—he can’t lose!

“But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away everything that is his? He’d curse you right to your face, that’s what.”

GOD replied, “We’ll see. Go ahead—do what you want with all that is his. Just don’t hurt *him*.” Then Satan left the presence of GOD.

Sometime later, while Job’s children were having one of their parties at the home of the oldest son, a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys grazing in the field next to us when Sabeans attacked. They stole the animals and killed the field hands. I’m the only one to get out alive and tell you what happened.”

While he was still talking, another messenger arrived and said, “Bolts of lightning struck the sheep and the shepherds and fried them—burned them to a crisp. I’m the only one to get out alive and tell you what happened.”

While he was still talking, another messenger arrived and said, “Chaldeans coming from three directions raided the camels and massacred the camel drivers. I’m the only one to get out alive and tell you what happened.”

While he was still talking, another messenger arrived and said, “Your children were having a party at the home of the oldest brother when a tornado swept in off the desert and struck the house. It collapsed on the young people and they died. I’m the

only one to get out alive and tell you what happened.”

Job got to his feet, ripped his robe, shaved his head, then fell to the ground and worshiped:

Naked I came from my mother's womb,  
naked I'll return to the womb of the earth.  
GOD gives, GOD takes.  
God's name be ever blessed.

Not once through all this did Job sin; not once did he blame God.

## think

- Why did God let Satan ruin Job financially and kill all his children?
- Why did Job continue to worship God despite these catastrophes?
- Can you trust a God who allows financial ruin and even the death of children? What makes you say that?
- How does this story affect your ability “to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*” (Matthew 6:31)?

## pray

God, the bad things that have happened or might happen . . .

read you call this safe?

From *The Divine Conspiracy*, by Dallas Willard<sup>2</sup>

“This present world is a perfectly safe place for us to be.” That certainly is what Jesus, and the Bible as a whole, has to say to us. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23).

I recognize how strange, even *strained*, it sounds. But that is only because the entire posture of our embodied self and its surroundings is habitually inclined toward physical or “earthly” reality as the only reality there is. Hence, to treasure anything else *must* be wrong. It is to rest on illusions. We must be prepared to be treated as more or less crazy unless we value what is “on earth” as supreme for human existence.

But of course if we do value “mammon” [money and what it buys] as normal people seem to think we should, our fate is fixed. Our fate is *anxiety*. It is worry. It is frustration. The words *anxious* and *worry* both have reference to strangling or being choked. Certainly that is how we feel when we are anxious. Things and events have us by the throat and seem to be cutting off our life. We are being harmed, or we fear what will come upon us, and all our efforts are insufficient to do anything about it.

think

- Why is worry inevitable if we value money and what it buys as much as people seem to think we should?
- What does it mean to say, “This present world is a perfectly safe place for us to be”?
- For you, is the world a perfectly safe place if it doesn’t guarantee that you can afford cable TV, cell phones, cars less than six years old, a home as large or as well decorated as your friends’ homes, schools in the district you want, clothes and grooming at a certain level of style, or (fill in whatever material items seem appropriate here)? Why do you think that?

- Is the world a perfectly safe place if your children don't grow up to maintain a material standard of living equal to or greater than yours?
- What else tempts you to doubt that the world is a perfectly safe place for you?

pray

Lord, the world is a perfectly safe place for me if . . .

read all i ask is one thing

Philippians 4:6-7

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

Psalm 27

Light, space, zest—  
that's GOD!

So, with him on my side I'm fearless,  
afraid of no one and nothing.

When vandal hordes ride down  
ready to eat me alive,  
Those bullies and toughs  
fall flat on their faces.

When besieged,  
I'm calm as a baby.  
When all hell breaks loose,  
I'm collected and cool.

I'm asking GOD for one thing,  
only one thing:  
To live with him in his house  
my whole life long.  
I'll contemplate his beauty;  
I'll study at his feet.

That's the only quiet, secure place  
in a noisy world,  
The perfect getaway,  
far from the buzz of traffic.

God holds me head and shoulders  
above all who try to pull me down.  
I'm headed for his place to offer anthems  
that will raise the roof!  
Already I'm singing God-songs;  
I'm making music to God.

Listen, God, I'm calling at the top of my lungs:  
"Be good to me! Answer me!"  
When my heart whispered, "Seek God,"  
my whole being replied,  
"I'm seeking him!"  
Don't hide from me now!

You've always been right there for me;  
don't turn your back on me now.  
Don't throw me out, don't abandon me;  
you've always kept the door open.  
My father and mother walked out and left me,  
but God took me in.

Point me down your highway, God;  
direct me along a well-lighted street;  
show my enemies whose side you're on.  
Don't throw me to the dogs,  
those liars who are out to get me,  
filling the air with their threats.

I'm sure now I'll see God's goodness  
in the exuberant earth.

Stay with God!

Take heart. Don't quit.

I'll say it again:

Stay with God.

## think

- In Philippians 4, what does God promise to do if you pray rather than worry?
- If God doesn't promise to give us everything we pray for, then why pray?
- What happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of our life?
- What security does Psalm 27 offer? What portrait of God does the psalmist paint?
- How important to you is the "one thing" this psalmist seeks?
- Where are you now with regard to trusting God?

## pray

Father, instead of worrying, I want to ask you for . . .

## LIVE

### what i want to discuss

What have you discovered this week that you definitely want to discuss with your small group? Write that here. Then begin your small-group discussion with these thoughts.

### so what?

Use the following space to summarize the truths you uncovered about trusting God, how you feel about them, and where you need to begin in dealing with your situation. Review your “Beginning Place” if you need to remember where you began. How does God’s truth affect the next step in your journey?

### now what?

What is one practical thing you can do to respond to what you discovered? What concrete action can you take? Remember to think realistically—an admirable but unreachable goal is as good as no goal. Discuss your goal in your small group to further define it.

### how?

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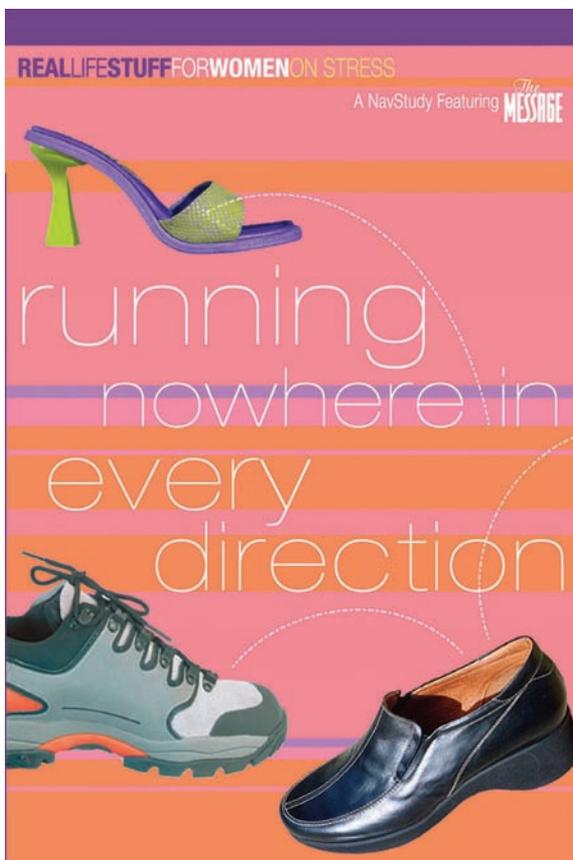
lesson 6

1. Marilyn Gardner, "Two Incomes, More Debt?" From the September 17, 2003, issue of *The Christian Science Monitor* ([www.csmonitor.com](http://www.csmonitor.com)). Reproduced with permission. © 2003 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.
2. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 208-209.

# Happiness

## LESSON SEVEN

From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# happiness

## a reminder:

*Before you dive into this study, spend a little time reviewing what you wrote in the previous lesson's "Live" section. How are you doing? Check with your small-group members and review your progress toward your goals. If necessary, adjust your goals and plans, and then recommit to them.*

## the beginning place

What do you want out of life? No, really. If you're like a lot of women, you may meekly whisper (or shout), "I just want to be happy." That doesn't seem like much to ask.

But what makes you happy? Surprisingly, research suggests that humans are poor predictors of what will make them happiest.<sup>1</sup> (The writers of the Bible would not find this surprising.) So to set the stage for this lesson, take the following quiz.

1. How would you define happiness?
  - a. Good feelings
  - b. Good feelings over a long period of time
  - c. A life well lived, having pursued and reached valuable goals
  - d. A fortunate life in which things generally go well
  - e. A connection with God that makes me a citizen of God's kingdom
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How happy are you?
  - a. Very happy
  - b. Fairly happy
  - c. Neither happy nor unhappy
  - d. Fairly unhappy
  - e. Very unhappy
  
3. When are you happiest? (Choose as many as are true for you.)
  - a. Alone
  - b. With friends
  - c. With just my husband
  - d. With just my children
  - e. With my husband and children
  - f. With other family members
  - g. At work
  - h. In a church worship service
  - i. In another church activity
  - j. Praying
  - k. At the gym
  - l. Doing a hobby
  - m. Doing housework
  - n. Doing volunteer work
  - o. Resting/sleeping
  - p. Having sex
  - q. Watching TV
  - r. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What is it about the items you chose in question 3 that gives you happiness?



## read happiness at bargain prices

From the *Money* article “How to Buy Happiness. Cheap.” by David Futrelle<sup>2</sup>

Make love, not money. That was the most unusual message of a research note this summer from stock strategist James Montier at Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, urging his well-heeled clients to set aside thoughts of stocks for a moment and to focus instead on the things that really make folks happy—namely love, sex, exercise and sleep. . . .

Disposable income for the average American has grown about 80% since 1972, but the percentage describing themselves as “very happy” (roughly a third) has barely budged over the years, according to the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center.

Why is this? Well, as Cornell University economist Robert Frank notes, we humans are highly adaptable animals, quickly adjusting our expectations to new realities. As living standards increase, most of us respond by raising our own standards. Things that once seemed luxuries now seem necessities. Call it the “once they’ve seen Paris” effect. As a result, we’re working harder than ever to buy stuff that satisfies us less and less.

How to snap this vicious cycle? New research in psychology and economics offers practical suggestions on how to increase your consumer satisfaction—without increasing spending.

- *If you can’t be with the stuff you love, love the stuff you’re with.* Research by Robert Emmons, a psychology professor at the University of California at Davis, found that people encouraged to keep “gratitude journals” were far more satisfied with their lives than those who weren’t encouraged to accentuate the positive. So don’t waste your life fretting over what you ain’t got. Give thanks for what you have—it can actually do you good.

- *Spend selectively.* Splurge only on those things that really bring you lasting pleasure; skimp on the rest. If you're a true-blue cinephile with a DVD collection to rival Roger Ebert's, it might make sense to invest in a plasma TV. But for most of us, a cheaper alternative is more than good enough.
- *Don't buy things, buy freedom.* While people easily adjust to bigger houses and cars, stress is stress no matter how rich or poor you are. As Frank notes, commuting through congestion is miserable for most of us, whether we've been doing it for four months or 40 years, and an assortment of studies shows that commutes (even as short as 15 minutes a day) can have serious and measurable effects on health. (There's a reason bus drivers seem so grumpy all the time.) If you're working endless hours to finance a lifestyle that isn't making you happy, consider cutting back your hours and getting by on less. It may not be easy to do, but in the long run it's likely to make you far happier than a new SUV ever could.

## think

- This article says love, sex, exercise, and sleep make people happy. How do you respond to that?
- List ten things you're grateful for.
- How easy was it for you to list what you're grateful for? What helps or hinders you?
- What do you think about the advice, "Don't buy things, buy freedom"?
- What hinders you from buying freedom?
- Choose one of the things you identified as making you happy—friends, for instance. What would it take for you to invest more in friends (or whatever you chose)?

think (continued)

pray

Father, thank you for . . .

read and even deeper discounts

Isaiah 55:1-3,6-13

“Hey there! All who are thirsty,  
 come to the water!  
 Are you penniless?  
 Come anyway—buy and eat!  
 Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk.  
 Buy without money—everything’s free!  
 Why do you spend your money on junk food,  
 your hard-earned cash on cotton candy?  
 Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best,  
 fill yourself with only the finest.  
 Pay attention, come close now,  
 listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words.  
 I’m making a lasting covenant commitment with you,  
 the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring  
 love. . . .”

Seek **God** while he’s here to be found,  
 pray to him while he’s close at hand.  
 Let the wicked abandon their way of life  
 and the evil their way of thinking.  
 Let them come back to **God**, who is merciful,  
 come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness.

“I don’t think the way you think.  
 The way you work isn’t the way I work.” **God’s Decree.**  
 “For as the sky soars high above earth,  
 so the way I work surpasses the way you work,  
 and the way I think is beyond the way you think.  
 Just as rain and snow descend from the skies  
 and don’t go back until they’ve watered the earth,  
 Doing their work of making things grow and blossom,  
 producing seed for farmers and food for the hungry,

So will the words that come out of my mouth  
not come back empty-handed.  
They'll do the work I sent them to do,  
they'll complete the assignment I gave them.

“So you'll go out in joy,  
you'll be led into a whole and complete life.  
The mountains and hills will lead the parade,  
bursting with song.  
All the trees of the forest will join the procession,  
exuberant with applause.  
No more thistles, but giant sequoias,  
no more thornbushes, but stately pines—  
Monuments to me, to **God**,  
living and lasting evidence of **God**.”

## think

- How does this passage suggest we seek what we're hungry for? What are you hungry for?
- What is the “junk food” God warns against? To what degree do you think your stress is influenced by seeking and consuming “junk food”?
- How is God's way of thinking different from your way?
- God promises, “So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life.” Why should you believe this?
- Why do so many women under stress find it hard to believe what this passage promises?

think (continued)

pray

Lord, I want to buy . . .

read but *she* has . . . !

From *The Art of Happiness*, by the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, M.D.<sup>3</sup>

Our feelings of contentment are strongly influenced by our tendency to compare. When we compare our current situation to our past and find that we're better off, we feel happy. This happens, for instance, when our income suddenly jumps from \$20,000–\$30,000 a year, but it's not the absolute amount of income that makes us happy, as we soon find out when we get used to our new income and discover that we won't be happy again unless we're making \$40,000 a year. We also look around and compare ourselves to others. No matter how much we make, we tend to be dissatisfied with our income if our neighbor is making more. Professional athletes complain bitterly about annual salaries of \$1 million, \$2 million or \$3 million, citing the higher salary of a teammate as justification for their unhappiness. This tendency seems to support H. L. Mencken's definition of a wealthy man: one whose income is \$100 a year higher than his wife's sister's husband.

So we can see how our feeling of life satisfaction often depends on who we compare ourselves to. Of course, we compare other things besides income. Constant comparison with those who are smarter, more beautiful, or more successful than ourselves also tends to breed envy, frustration, and unhappiness. But we can use this same principle in a positive way: we can increase our feeling of life satisfaction by comparing ourselves to those who are less fortunate than us and by reflecting on all the things we have.

think

- To whom do you compare yourself? Friends? Relatives? People you went to school with? People you see on TV? Famous people?
- What do you compare? Income? Looks? Clothes? Home and interior decorating? Achievements? Children? Husband or boy-

friend? Spiritual depth?

- How does comparing yourself to others affect your stress level?
- How competitive are you? When does competition spur you on to be more fruitful, and when does it make you less fruitful?
- Think of someone less fortunate than you. Compare your life to his or hers. How does doing this affect you?
- Think of someone you admire. Are you more inclined to envy that person or to see him or her as a role model of qualities you can aspire to? Why is that?

pray

Lord, when I compare . . .

## read better than happy

### Matthew 5:3-12

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

## think

- Jesus says, “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope.” Why do you think Jesus said that? What do you think about it?
- Why does contentment bring blessing? How is blessedness connected to or different from happiness?
- Do you consider yourself blessed? Why or why not?
- How does your view of happiness or blessedness affect the way you invest your time?
- If you had to choose between the things Jesus promises in this passage (such as “more of God and his rule”) and other things you value (such as having a home as nice as your friends’ or getting your kids into good colleges), which would you choose? How fair is it to pose this as an either/or choice?

## pray

Jesus, when I think about the blessing you offer . . .

**read** if paul's happy, why is he still running?

**1 Corinthians 9:21-27**

I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be *in* on it!

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.

I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

**2 Timothy 4:6-8**

I'm about to die, my life an offering on God's altar. This is the only race worth running. I've run hard right to the finish, believed all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause! Depend on it, he's an honest judge. He'll do right not only by me, but by everyone eager for his coming.

**think**

- In both of these passages, the apostle Paul speaks of “running” in positive terms. When is “running hard” a good thing?
- The 1 Corinthians passage comes from Paul's midlife. Does he seem happy to you? What makes you say that?
- In 2 Timothy, Paul looks back on his life as a man about to die. Why is he happy?
- When you are old and look back on your life, what do you hope to see?

- Do these passages inspire you? If so, what do they inspire you to do? If not, do they make you feel pressure, guilt, or something else?

pray

Lord, at the end of my life, I want to look back . . .

## LIVE

what i want to discuss

What have you discovered this week that you definitely want to discuss with your small group? Write that here. Then begin your small-group discussion with these thoughts.

so what?

Use the following space to summarize the truths you uncovered about happiness, how you feel about them, and where you need to begin in dealing with your situation. Review your “Beginning Place” if you need to remember where you began. How does God’s truth affect the next step in your journey?

now what?

What is one practical thing you can do to respond to what you discovered? What concrete action can you take? Remember to think realistically—an admirable but unreachable goal is as good as no goal. Discuss your goal in your small group to further define it.

how?

How can your group—or even one other person—help you follow through with the goal you described? What support do you need? How will you measure the success of your plan? Write the details here.

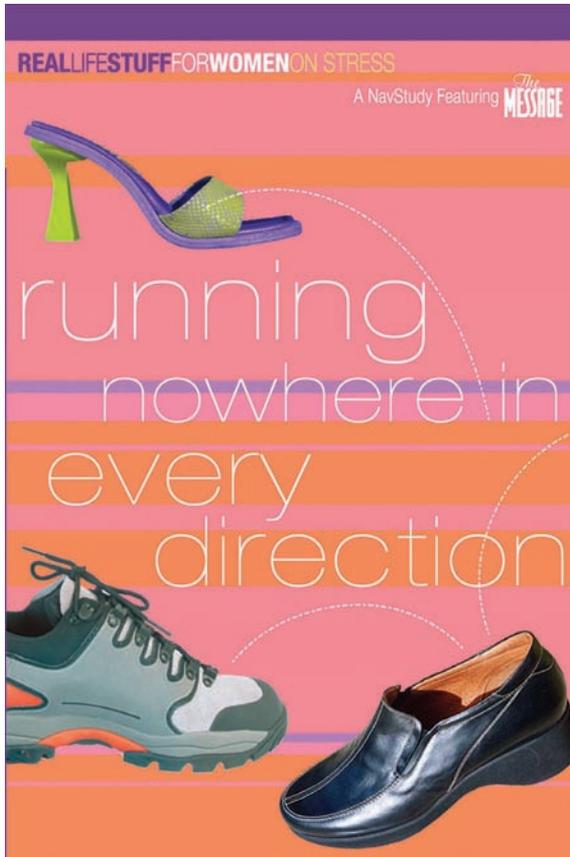
lesson 7

1. Jon Gertner, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2003.
2. David Futrelle, "How to Buy Happiness. Cheap." *Money*, October 2004, p. 36.
3. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, M.D., *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), pp. 22-23.

# Rest

## LESSON EIGHT

From *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*



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# rest

## a reminder:

*Before you dive into this study, spend a little time reviewing what you wrote in the previous lesson's "Live" section. How are you doing? Check with your small-group members and review your progress toward your goals. If necessary, adjust your goals and plans, and then recommit to them.*

## the beginning place

Rest. What we wouldn't give for some good rest! A month somewhere warm, on the beach perhaps . . . a day at a spa . . . even a good night's sleep.

The Bible has a great deal to say about rest. Unfortunately, a lot of what it says is about the Sabbath; that is, setting aside one day out of seven to connect with God and one another. In Old Testament times that day was Saturday, but the earliest Christians shifted to observing Sunday, the day on which Christ rose from the dead.

Today we do try to catch a worship service sometime on the weekend, but often it just feels like another item on a long to-do list. Getting kids ready to go to church is not exactly restful! And the idea of spending the remainder of Sunday enjoying family and friends or enjoying more time with God through prayer and study seems laughably out of reach. Our kids have soccer or music lessons; we have errands to run and homes to clean. If we didn't get things done on Sunday, when would we do them?

Besides, the Sabbath smacks of legalism to many of us. At some times and places in Christian history, children weren't allowed to play games on the Sabbath. That kind of Sabbath seems more burden than blessing.

To begin this session, then, reflect on what goes through your mind when you think of the Sabbath. Do you feel longing or guilt? Does it seem desirable or ridiculous? Legalistic or freeing? What aspects of modern life make the Sabbath difficult, if not impossible? Describe your starting point on the subject of the Sabbath; we'll go deeper from there.

## read *i'm a former slave?*

### Exodus 20:8-11

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to **God**, your God. Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days **God** made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in them; he rested on the seventh day. Therefore **God** blessed the Sabbath day; he set it apart as a holy day.

### Exodus 23:12

“Work for six days and rest the seventh so your ox and donkey may rest and your servant and migrant workers may have time to get their needed rest.”

### Deuteronomy 5:12-15

No working on the Sabbath; keep it holy just as **God**, your God, commanded you. Work six days, doing everything you have to do, but the seventh day is a Sabbath, a Rest Day—no work: not you, your son, your daughter, your servant, your maid, your ox, your donkey (or any of your animals), and not even the foreigner visiting your town. That way your servants and maids will get the same rest as you. Don't ever forget that you were slaves in Egypt and **God**, your God, got you out of there in a powerful show of strength. That's why **God**, your God, commands you to observe the day of Sabbath rest.

## think

- What beliefs about God do you see reflected in these passages?
- Why is it valuable to pause and remember that “God made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in them”?
- Here is one explanation of the Sabbath: “What happens when we stop working and controlling nature? . . . When we cease interfering in the world we are acknowledging that it is God’s world.”<sup>1</sup> What value, if any, would this weekly reminder have in your life?
- Deuteronomy says that the Sabbath reminds us that only God enables us to be more than slaves. What value would this weekly reminder have in your life?
- A Sabbath gives rest to servants and other low-wage workers. Does that matter to you? Explain.

## pray

Creator God, you made the world in which I work . . .

## read the demise of saturday

From the *Time* article “And on the Seventh Day We Rested?” by Nancy Gibbs<sup>2</sup>

Over time, Sunday has gone from a day we could do only a very few things to the only day we can do just about anything we want. The U.S. is too diverse, our lives too busy, our economy too global and our appetites too fast to lose a whole day that could be spent working or playing or power shopping. Pulled between piety and profits, even Christian bookstores are open. Children come to Sunday school dressed in their soccer uniforms; some churches have started their own leagues just to control the schedule. Politicians recite their liturgies in TV studios. Post offices may still be closed, but once you miss that first Sunday e-mail from the boss, it becomes forever harder not to log on and check in. Even the casinos are open.

If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan, Albert Schweitzer said—which raises a question for our times: What do we lose if Sunday becomes just like any other day? . . . Rhode Island just became the 32nd state to let liquor stores open every Sunday; until this month, they could do so only in December, perhaps because even George Washington’s eggnog recipe called for brandy, whiskey and rum. Social conservatives may want to honor the Fourth Commandment but businesses want the income, states need the tax revenues, and busy families want the flexibility.

With progress, of course, comes backlash from those who desperately want to preserve the old ways. Mom-and-pop liquor stores in New York fought to keep the blue laws to have more time with their families. Car dealers in Kansas City, Mo., pushed for a law to make them close on Sundays so they could have a day off without losing out to competition. . . .

Pope John Paul II even wrote an apostolic letter in defense of Sunday: “When Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely a part of a ‘weekend,’” he wrote, “people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see ‘the heavens.’”

## think

- How do you typically spend Sunday? What to you are the pros and cons of making Sunday a no-work day for everybody?
- This article gives many reasons why our culture has ceased to treat Sunday as a Sabbath. Which reasons do you relate to?
- How would you manage your life if stores were closed on Sunday so that workers, especially in family-owned businesses, could have a day off?
- What do you think of the statement, “If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan”?
- What does this statement mean: “When Sunday loses its fundamental meaning . . . people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see ‘the heavens’”? How do you respond?

## pray

Father, Sundays for me . . .

**read** the trouble with business as usual

Jeremiah 17:21-24,27

“This is God’s Message. Be careful, if you care about your lives, not to desecrate the Sabbath by turning it into just another work-day, lugging stuff here and there. Don’t use the Sabbath to do business as usual. Keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors. They never did it, as you know. They paid no attention to what I said and went about their own business, refusing to be guided or instructed by me.

“But now, take seriously what I tell you. Quit desecrating the Sabbath by busily going about your own work, and keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing business as usual. . . .

“But if you won’t listen to me, won’t keep the Sabbath holy, won’t quit using the Sabbath for doing your own work, busily going in and out of the city gates on your self-important business, then I’ll burn the gates down. In fact, I’ll burn the whole city down, palaces and all, with a fire nobody will be able to put out!”

**think**

- According to Jeremiah (and other biblical prophets), one of the main reasons why God let ancient Jerusalem be destroyed was the people’s refusal to give up “business as usual” for one day a week. Why do you suppose this issue was such a big deal to God?
- What does working all the time say about one’s attitude toward God? What does making employees work all the time say about an employer’s attitude toward God? Toward people?
- How does your employer treat employee time off—such as weekends, evenings, vacation time, and family emergencies?
- In Jeremiah’s day, God held the entire society responsible for workaholism. Why the whole society and not just individuals?
- Can you imagine God punishing our society for workaholism, as he punished ancient Israel? Or was that a unique situation?

**think** (continued)

**pray**

Lord, help me give up business as usual . . .

## read no nit-picking allowed

### Mark 2:23-28

One Sabbath day [Jesus] was walking through a field of ripe grain. As his disciples made a path, they pulled off heads of grain. The Pharisees told on them to Jesus: “Look, your disciples are breaking Sabbath rules!”

Jesus said, “Really? Haven’t you ever read what David did when he was hungry, along with those who were with him? How he entered the sanctuary and ate fresh bread off the altar, with the Chief Priest Abiathar right there watching—holy bread that no one but priests were allowed to eat—and handed it out to his companions?” Then Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren’t made to serve the Sabbath. The Son of Man is no lackey to the Sabbath. He’s in charge!”

### Colossians 2:16-17,20-23

So don’t put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services, or holy days. All those things are mere shadows cast before what was to come; the substance is Christ. . . .

So, then, if with Christ you’ve put all that pretentious and infantile religion behind you, why do you let yourselves be bullied by it? “Don’t touch this! Don’t taste that! Don’t go near this!” Do you think things that are here today and gone tomorrow are worth that kind of attention? Such things sound impressive if said in a deep enough voice. They even give the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic. But they’re just another way of showing off, making yourselves look important.

## think

- What do you think Jesus means when he says, “The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren’t made to serve the Sabbath”?
- In Colossians 2, Paul says we shouldn’t let anyone pressure us about religious customs such as the Sabbath. How do these words affect your views on the Old Testament passages about the Sabbath?
- How do you reconcile the Old Testament value placed on the Sabbath with Jesus’ words in Mark?
- How, if at all, can the Sabbath serve you?

## pray

Jesus, instead of rigid rules . . .

## read a day for joy

From the *Today's Christian Woman* article "In Today's Culture, What Does It Mean to Keep the Sabbath Holy?" by Lauren F. Winner<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Christians aren't bound by Old-Testament Sabbath directives. . . . But Jesus never said to forget the Sabbath completely. Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, after all! And through the ages Christians have seen the wisdom of devoting one full day to rest and praise. There's an old Puritan saying, "Good Sabbaths make good Christians."

Still, honoring the Sabbath was easier in Puritan New England, where almost everyone took the Sabbath seriously. Shops weren't open on Sundays, businesses closed their doors, and everyone headed to church. Sabbaths are much more difficult in contemporary America. In fact, in a society that values busyness and productivity, observing the Sabbath is downright countercultural.

That's not to say contemporary society doesn't encourage us to relax. To the contrary, most secular women's magazines and television talk shows (not to mention Calgon ads) instruct us to indulge ourselves. While there's nothing wrong with the occasional bubble bath, Calgon days aren't quite the same thing as Sabbath. The key to the Sabbath isn't merely rest. Rather, it's that in our rest we turn our attention to God, whose rest our Sabbath mirrors.

So how, in our hectic world, can we set apart a day truly given over to rest and reverence?

I've found it helpful to mark the beginning of the Sabbath. On Saturday evenings, I gather with friends for an unhurried time of food, fellowship, and prayer.

I also have taken inspiration from the two commandments that govern Jewish Sabbath observance: to not work on the Sabbath, and to be joyful. On Sundays, I don't shop, I don't grade papers, and I don't touch my phone. I even try not to make any plans for the week ahead. Instead, I do things that will give me and God joy. I take long walks with friends. I take extra time for Bible study. And I'm never overly meticulous about these

guidelines. On a recent Sunday, my mother, who's quite ill, ran out of her nutritional drinks. Of course I headed to the store and bought her a pack.

The way into Christian Sabbath observance isn't so much about rules as orientation: away from the busyness of the week and towards the Creator who rested. In this we may find a true sense of *Shabbat shalom*, Sabbath peace.

## think

- Why does this writer think the Sabbath is important for her even as a Christian?
- What do you think of the way she spends the Sabbath? Is this a pipe dream for you? A nightmare?
- What do you think about setting aside a day for things “that will give [you] and God joy”?
- How could you move toward treating Sunday as a day for giving you, your family, your friends, and God joy? What would be the cost or potential downside of setting Sunday apart like this?
- If setting Sunday aside doesn't work for you, what alternatives do you see for getting some Sabbath rest into your life?

## pray

Father, the Sabbath I dream of . . .

read wanted: girlfriends

From the *National Women's Health Report* article "Women, Chronic Stress & Resilience"<sup>4</sup>

Women are biologically programmed to "tend and befriend" when they're under stress—to make sure the children are safe and then network with other women, calling a friend to vent about a bad day at work, for example. . . .

"Chronic stress erodes women's time and so keeps them from doing the very things that are most healthy in times of stress," she says. "Seeking contact with female relatives and friends."

So she emphasizes that doing such things as calling up a friend or arranging a ladies' night out are not frivolous pursuits but very adaptive ways of dealing with stress. "Women need to make time for them even though they seem like pure recreational activities," she says.

think

- When you're under stress, what do you need?
- How important to you is time with friends?
- What can you do to build enough friendship time into your life?
- Some women who can't relate to the Sabbath find other ways to prioritize God, family, and friends. If you feel this way, how can you go about it?

pray

God, help me make time for friends . . .

## LIVE

This is the end of *Running Nowhere in Every Direction*, but it's not the end of the story for you. Hopefully, you've discovered some truths about your life and seen opportunities for positive change. If you're like most people, though, sticking to the status quo is far more comfortable than changing, especially when your world prefers you to be as you have been. What you've gained from this study will soon be left in the dust unless you really want your life to be different.

- What thoughts about Sabbath rest do you definitely want to discuss with your small group?

- What has God been trying to say to you about the following?

Your schedule

The expectations you live with

Your limits

Perfectionism and maturity in love



lesson 8

1. Lis Harris, *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family*, quoted in Lauren Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath* (Orleans, Mass.: Paraclete, 2003), pp. 6-7.
2. Nancy Gibbs, "And on the Seventh Day We Rested?" *Time*, August 2, 2004, p. 90.
3. Lauren F. Winner, "In Today's Culture, What Does It Mean to Keep the Sabbath Holy?" This article first appeared in *Today's Christian Woman*, January/February 2004, p. 16.
4. "Women, Chronic Stress & Resilience," *National Women's Health Report*, June 1, 2003.